

AN ALICE IN WONDERLAND RETELLING



LOOKING GLASS DRAGONS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
ARMITAGE & CULICAN

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I'd always had big plans for my eighteenth birthday. I mean, who doesn't dream of the day they can call themselves an adult and go for a drink in a bar without having to show a fake ID?

Okay, my plans had never solidified into something where I'd actually gotten together with my friends and booked. But my idle thoughts on the matter had definitely included a lot of alcohol, probably on a deserted island somewhere... And cake. Cake for breakfast. You were allowed to do that as an adult, right? Cake for breakfast was Adulting 101. What I most definitely hadn't planned was to be spending it in some old lady's house in some small village in the middle of nowhere named Mimsy-under-Liddell. Some dead old lady to be more accurate. On top of that, I certainly hadn't prepared for the fact I'd be cleaning the old lady's house...sorry, dead old lady's house.

If it wasn't for my mom, I would be doing something much more adventurous and decidedly less boring, but she'd been offered the job at the last minute, and along with the offer, came a great deal of money. A stupid amount of money that she couldn't pass up. And that meant I couldn't pass it up either.

"It won't take long," my mom had promised. "A few days, max... Maybe a week...I'll buy you a cocktail when we are done, one of them

fancy ones.”

Oh, I’m so easily bought! Not that it was the promise of the drink that had me working with her, although I’d hold her to it, but the fact that my mother had skimped and saved my whole life and given up on so many things so I could do such mundane things as eat and, you know, wear clothes.

Which is why I’d found myself hauling old vases and teapots and tapestries into a huge truck outside a house that could easily pass as a mansion, maybe even a mini-castle.

The room I was in could fit my whole house into it and still have space for the grand dining table at the end of the room that seated at least eighteen people. The twenty-foot-high walls were covered in old oil paintings of centuries of people and an absurd number of cats. A large mantelpiece above a fireplace held even more framed pictures of cats. The mantelpiece itself was scorched, but on the top rather than from below, which seemed weird. On the opposite end to where I stood, the largest painting was of a rather busty elderly woman wearing a red and black corset style dress with hearts embroidered around the neckline. I’d deliberately kept my eyes away from it since first walking into the room. It gave me the creeps. The woman, who, more than likely, was the owner...dead owner of the house appeared to be watching my every move. I knew from the old paintings my mother studied that this was quite a normal illusion in old paintings, but this one was different. Not only was it like her eyes were following my every move, but she looked like she was disapproving of me touching her stuff.

“Don’t drop it!” my mother cautioned from behind me as I casually picked up a painting of a cat in a thick gilt frame. I turned to find her in the doorway with a large gold-colored vase in her arms.

“It’s ugly,” I pointed out. “I don’t think anyone would care if I drop it. A rip might make it better.” I held it up for her to get a good look. “It looks like the cat is grinning, and it’s pink.”

My mother smirked then waved her hand at me. “We aren’t being paid to critique the antiques, just pack them up and put them into storage.”

“Where you critique them.” I reminded her. The actual job was to pack up everything in the house and decide which pieces were worth enough to bother with selling, which pieces needed to go to a thrift store, and then, to throw whatever was left in the garbage. It was my mother’s idea to take it all to a warehouse first where she could evaluate each item properly.

“Where I critique them,” she agreed, giving me a grin. “You never know, that might be a lost Picasso.”

I looked at the grinning cat picture again. Now I was no art expert, but this looked like a kid had drawn it with a stumpy crayon...maybe it was a Picasso after all.

I wrapped it up the way my mother had shown me and followed her to the truck that was parked in the long driveway outside the front entrance.

“Truck’s full,” I announced.

My mother rolled her eyes and gave an exaggerated sigh. “I swear, I only just unloaded it five minutes ago.”

“Want me to come with you?” I asked, jabbing my thumbs into my jean pockets.

She looked exhausted, like what she needed was a three-week vacation and an endless supply of cocktails rather than the offer of help to unload a truck.

She wiped a hand over her eyes, pushing her dark blonde, dust-covered hair from her face, and shook her head.

“We’ve too much still to do. We haven’t even started the second floor yet. Why don’t you start packing stuff up there, and I’ll get back as quickly as I can. Don’t try lifting any heavy furniture until I get back.”

I gave her a grin and a salute. “Yes, ma’am!”

She got to her feet and picked up the vase she’d just covered in bubble wrap. “Oh, and if you see a large mirror, leave it be. I was told not to touch

it. I guess it's nailed to the wall or something."

"Righto. Anything else?"

She put her arm around me and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll bring us some lunch and birthday cake."

"Thanks, Mom."

I fingered the broach she'd given me that morning for my birthday. It was a cheap trinket she'd found with my name Alice embossed in the silver. I knew it wasn't worth much, but it came with a promise. Once we'd gotten paid for this job, she'd buy me a better one. I didn't need a better one; I loved it, but I knew she wouldn't take no for an answer.

I waited until I heard the sound of the truck taking off before turning around. The facade of the building was the type of place that any wannabe princess would die for. Except there was something about it that made me think that maybe someone had died there. It was too big, architecturally beautiful, but somehow lonely and dark. Just like the portrait of its deceased owner inside, it gave me the creeps.

I headed inside and then up the grand staircase that curved upward from the entrance hall. The only things left to deal with on the main floor were the larger pieces of furniture, and I'd managed to talk my mom into hiring a couple of local lads to help us with those at the end of the week.

I took the stairs two at a time, running my hand up the ornate banister, letting the dust fall to the floor as I went.

No one had told us who the old lady was that had owned the house, but I had a feeling she'd been dead a while, or at least unable to clean. In fact, all my mother knew about the job was that she'd died, and her relative was willing to pay a lot of money to clear the house. My mother hadn't even been given a name, just the address, a wad of cash, and a set of keys posted to our house along with a letter promising more money when the job was complete.

The wide stairwell opened up to a black and white checkered hallway with beautifully carved doorways leading right to a large glass window at the end. The hallway smelled musty as though no one had opened the windows to let some air in, in eons.

I opened the first door, marveling at the ornate brass handle. Inside the room, the musty smell intensified. The only thing in the room was an old dresser. Like everything else in the house, it was beautifully carved and exquisite. I doubted it would end up in a thrift store. After a quick peek to see if it was empty, I moved on to the next room. Ten minutes later, I'd checked almost every room on the right side of the corridor. Apart from a few bits of furniture, there was nothing for me to pack up.

The last door was different from the others. For a start, it was wider, double the width with double doors. I pulled down the handle and, to my surprise, found the door locked. Pushing harder to make sure it wasn't just stiff, I jangled the handle. It didn't budge. I turned to head to the door opposite when I heard a noise. It was very faint, a light swooshing sound. It sounded like it was coming from the locked room. I ran my hand over the beautifully molded brass plate, an intricate locking design, almost Celtic, but not quite. Small hearts and roses were dotted around the weaving vine pattern. Bending down, I placed my eye to the large keyhole. In my line of sight, I could see nothing but faded, flowery wallpaper, but a cold draught hit my eye, making me shiver.

"Great!" I sighed, standing up. Someone had left a window open. I didn't know as much as my mother about antiques, but I did know that rain and damp weren't good for them. And if there was one thing that could be counted on in England, it was rain.

My mother had left the huge bunch of house keys on the kitchen counter. I ran down and picked them up. On the way back up the stairs, I sifted through them. Most were ordinary, but one was brighter than the rest,

as though it had been handled a lot. It was also made with the same weave design as the door plate. A large brass heart topped the design.

As I slotted the key in the lock, a shiver of apprehension ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold breeze. The key turned in the lock easily, and the door opened, almost without any resistance. Like I was being invited in.

“Alice!!!” My mother’s voice shouted, making me drop the keys on the floor. My heart thudded loudly as the door continued opening on its own.

“I’m up here!” I yelled back, bending down to pick up the keys.

I turned my head to see my mother appear at the top of the stairs. “I decided to get lunch first. I figured the unpacking could wait half an hour. It’s not every day my little girl turns eighteen. I might have bought a bottle of wine to celebrate too.”

A gust of wind sent my hair fluttering about my face as my mother waved the wine bottle at me.

“I’ll be right down,” I shouted back along the corridor. “I was just checking this last room. I think one of the windows was left open!”

My mother’s hand went to her mouth as her face paled. “The windows are open? That could ruin some of the furniture...and the paintings. Can you check the windows on this floor and I’ll check the third floor. I’ll meet you back in the dining room in ten minutes, and we’ll have your birthday lunch.”

“Okay.”

I stepped into the room as my mom took the stairs to the top floor. I knew why she was so keen to keep the antiques dry. The mysterious stranger who’d hired her had promised her a small percentage of everything she auctioned. If anything was ruined, that was less money for us. Inside, I expected to find nothing but an open window, but I was wrong on both counts. The room had an old wardrobe and a side table with a vase on it. The only window was closed. I took a few steps toward it to make sure and

felt the breeze again. It hadn't come from the window at all, but from behind me. A faint swooshing sound hit my ears again. I turned back toward the open door.

I took a deep intake of breath as a shell-shocked girl looked back at me. My reflection gave me a start, but the real shock was the mirror itself. My mouth dropped at the sheer scale of it. It took up the whole wall apart from the space taken up by the double doors. Like the brass plate on the door, the massive gilt frame was carved in the same weaved pattern with hearts growing from the vines. This must have been the mirror that we were told not to touch, and no wonder. It would take more than two people to carry it. It would need a whole team just to take it down from the wall. The mirror shimmered almost like ripples on a clear pond, and my hair ruffled again. From the corner of my eye, I thought I saw the gilt vines in the frame moving. But when I looked straight at them, they were completely still. I wrapped my arms around my chest to stop myself from shivering as I heard my mother's footsteps moving around the room above me. They came to a stop. Then I heard her swearing loudly, followed by a huge bang like the sound of falling furniture.

"You alright?" I yelled as loudly as I could.

The mirror moved again. But this time it wasn't just the frame, but the whole mirror. Whatever my mother had done in the room upstairs had vibrated through the walls and knocked the gargantuan mirror from the wall. I stared in shock as it started to fall forward. My terrified reflection was the last thing I saw before it crashed down on me, smashing into a million pieces.

Curled up, my head down with my hands over it to shield myself, I waited for the pain of broken glass hitting me, but I'd already heard the sound of a thousand shards of glass splintering all over the floor. Yet, I'd not felt anything. Had the mirror missed me? Cautiously, I opened my eyes and peeked through my fingers. The mirror was back on the wall, exactly where it had been. The floor showed no sign of broken glass, so what was it I'd heard? It had sounded so close. A quick check of the window was enough to ascertain that it hadn't broken either, so what had?

"Mom?" I shouted loudly. If I hadn't broken something, it meant she must have.

When she didn't answer, I left the room and climbed the stairway to the level above

"Mom?" I called out again as I walked along the corridor. The carpet below my feet was in much better condition up here, and the red color was still rich and vibrant, unlike the faded carpets below. Maybe this floor hadn't been used as much. I started at the bedroom directly above the room with the mirror. My mother wasn't there, and there was no sign of anything broken. However, the room was a stark difference to the other rooms in the house. Everything looked new, in immaculate condition. There was even a

small pile of clothes neatly folded on the bed as though left for someone to come and put away. A cup and saucer sat on the nightstand, waiting for someone to wash it up. I gravitated to a bookcase. Pulling one of the books out, I checked the date of publication—1850. This book was over a hundred and seventy years old, and yet it looked brand new. The bindings were not stretched, the leather cover in perfect condition. They all were. A thrill of excitement ran through me. My mother was not an expert on old books, but I had a feeling that books as old as this, in such condition, would be worth a fortune. Every penny we made added to the final amount we came out with.

For the first time since entering the house, I felt like a trespasser, an interloper. Seeing everything out like this reminded me that this was a person's house, not just a museum. This room looked lived in as though its owner had just popped out and would be back at any second. Leaving the room, I checked the others on this floor. All were exactly the same as the first. Immaculate furniture, no dust like the floors below. No shattered glass either, so what was it that I'd heard earlier?

A shiver ran down my spine. The more rooms I looked in, the more my feelings of unease increased. It made no sense that the top floor of a house would be kept in perfect condition despite looking more lived-in than the two below. There was not a speck of dust anywhere, and the furniture, despite being antique, was all in almost flawless condition as though it had been manufactured yesterday instead of hundreds of years ago. I made a mental note to ask my mom about it and headed back down to the main floor.

Outside, the van had gone, which explained why I couldn't find my mother. It didn't explain why she'd gone without telling me, though. Nor did it explain why I could see the croquet lawn now. I was sure it had been hidden from the view of the house by overgrown bushes, but now the bushes were neatly clipped, and the gardens tended to. I rubbed my head, wondering if I'd been hit by the mirror after all. I didn't think I had, but

something wasn't adding up. Turning away from the window, I noticed something else. Everything we'd packed was back. Including things we'd already taken to storage. The furniture looked newer than I remembered. There was no way my mother could have unpacked all this in such a short space of time.

Fresh roses sat in a vase. The vase I'd carried out to the van earlier. Next to them sat a newspaper, One I didn't recognize. I picked it up and checked the date. Monday, 23rd February 1852. A shiver ran down my spine, followed by a flush of fear.

"No," I murmured, not understanding what I was seeing. I wondered for a second if someone was playing a trick on me, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why. Then my mind skipped to the house being re-furnished with modern copies of the furniture we'd removed to turn it into some kind of museum. It was a little far-fetched, and I was sure my mother would have been told me about it if that were the case. But the alternative was impossible.

The sound of voices filtered down the corridor.

"The French have the right idea," a woman sniffed. "Guillotine. Chop their heads right off!"

A man mumbled something back, though I couldn't hear what. The house was supposed to be empty. Not waiting to be caught, I opened the front door and ran down the long sweeping driveway. I needed some air to think. I also needed to speak to my mother. Wherever she'd gone, she'd be back soon. As I ran past the iron gates that marked the entrance to the grounds, my mind whirled with all the possibilities to explain what was going on, none of them plausible. Without paying much attention, I ran out into the road, tripping on cobbles that had most definitely not been there before. I lost my footing and came crashing to the ground right as a horse and carriage came thundering down the road. My heart pounded as the horse reared. I pulled my arm over my eyes and waited for death.

“I’m most frightfully sorry,” I heard a voice say. I looked up to find a man with his arm extended out to me. His hair was a shock of white, and he had a snub nose and pouchy cheeks.

“I’m late, you see. Late, always late.”

I took his hand and let him help me up from the cobbled street.

“A very important date!” he added as though that explained everything. The street was cobbled in both directions as far as I could see, and the street signs I’d seen on the way here were now gone. I rubbed my temples, suddenly dizzy with my second near-death experience of the day.

“Are you alright, my dear? You look a little green around the gills. Perhaps I should take you to a hospital?”

I shook my head, then wished I hadn’t when a bolt of pain rattled through it. “No, no, it’s fine, I’m just... Weren’t there some industrial chimneys over there in the distance?” I asked, pointing over the fields.

The man twitched his nose. “I don’t rightly remember it ever being so. Are you sure you are fine?”

Beyond my head, no part of me hurt, so I was pretty sure nothing was broken except my reality, which was completely fractured. The guy was wearing an old-fashioned outfit with a long dress coat and tall boots like he was on his way to a fancy dress party.

“I think so,” I mumbled, trying to pull my composure together.

“You really shouldn’t hang around Mrs. Heart’s house, you know,” he said, nodding up to the large house and pulling out a gold watch on a chain from his pocket. “She doesn’t like trespassers, and she’s been known to punish people found on her property who shouldn’t be there.”

Mrs. Heart? I knew that name. It was the woman who’d died, whose stuff we’d spent all morning packing up.

The man held the door to his carriage open. His actual carriage. A real one like something from a museum. Two black horses stood patiently at the front. “Let me at least take you to the village. It’s the least I can do, and you can get yourself a cup of tea at the tearoom.”

“I... er.” I was about to decline when I realized I had nothing to stay at the house for. My mother wasn’t there anymore. I could get myself a tea in the village and call her from there. She’d be able to explain what was going on. “Thank you, that would be lovely.”

I gazed out of the window as we took the short journey. Mimsey-on - Liddell was a quaint little village that hadn’t managed to drag itself into the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first. This man and his carriage only made it even more twee. I’d never been here before, but my mother had a few times when she was younger. She had come to stay with a now long-deceased aunt. She’d warned me that it was a bit behind the times. She hadn’t quite articulated just how behind the times it was. It was a pretty village, though, with the river Liddell running through it, giving it its twee name. When the carriage came to a stop, I thanked the man and stepped into the street. The teahouse he’d mentioned was a strange place, completely in keeping with the rest of the village. Even its name, Eatme/Drinkme sounded vaguely suggestive and quite strange. Red and white checked cloths covered the small round tables, and a small woman, wearing a matching apron, stood behind the counter.

“I’ll take a coke, please,” I said brightly. She looked at me strangely as though she didn’t know what I was talking about.

“A tea...I meant a tea.” If I’d come to this place on a weekend they were having a village-wide recreation of old times, I supposed I’d better play the part, no matter how ridiculous it all was.

She nodded to an empty table and told me she’d bring it out in a minute. I took a seat and pulled out my phone. No signal. Typical. I turned the phone off and then back on in the hope it would suddenly find a signal, but it didn’t. I slipped my phone back into my pocket and looked around. Besides me, there were only two other customers in the tearoom. One was asleep with his head on the table. Another looked upon me with a great deal of curiosity, which was ironic considering he was writing on a piece of paper using a quill. Next to him sat a pot of ink. He licked the quill, deepening the mark of ink on his tongue, and dipped the quill back into his ink, finally turning his attention away from me.

I watched as he mumbled to himself as he wrote. He really was a peculiar sort of character, although no more than anyone else I’d met that day. It was a weird place.

“Tea,” the woman said, slamming a cup down in front of me, sloshing half the contents on the tablecloth. The teacup had the words “drink me” painted onto the side.

I thanked her and took a sip. Not bad. I wasn’t much of a tea drinker, but it was pretty good. I felt in my pocket for my phone again as the bell above the door tinkled.

My mouth fell open as I took in the strange man who’d just walked through the door. He looked like a young Johnny Depp in his Edward Scissorhands era, though slightly less pale and, as far as I could see, with normal hands. He had the same dark mass of hair, although this man’s was partially hidden under a tall misshapen top hat, and he wore a suit of all black.

He strode up to the counter and ordered a cup of coffee, paying no attention to me or to any of the other occupants of the tea room. The woman that had served me lost her haughty expression at the sight of him and nervously set about making his coffee, using a huge kettle on a stove with an open flame. They really did go all out to make it appear old-fashioned. I had to applaud their commitment to the project or festival or whatever it was.

I couldn't take my eyes off the man, even though from where I was sitting, I could only see the side of his face. He had a beautiful profile, with a long straight nose and eyes as black as his attire. He certainly was striking. I wondered if it was his appearance that had put the woman on edge, or if she knew him, and it was something else. A quick glance at the man with the quill told me that he didn't like the sudden appearance of the stranger. His face was pulled into a scowl and his eyes locked on the back of the man in black.

He caught me looking and quickly went back to his writing.

When the man at the counter got his coffee, he placed a couple of coins on the counter and took the coffee right out of the shop, even though it hadn't been served to him in a takeaway cup.

I let out a low breath as I watched him walk across the street, coffee in hand.

"Young girls like you shouldn't be watching men the likes of him."

I begrudgingly took my attention away from the beautiful man and set my gaze on the man with the quill. He looked at me through watery eyes with ink stains all around his lips.

"He's mad, you know," he continued, "quite, quite mad!"

I nodded slowly. He wasn't the only one, it seemed. Everyone here seemed mad, and I wasn't sure if I wasn't beginning to join them in the collective insanity.

Outside on the street, I took a good look at the rows of shops. All were old-fashioned, and none had any modern-day things I'd expect to see. No aerials, no cables or electricity lines. While it was possible that the village had elected to stay in the nineteenth century and collectively not modernize in any way at all, the probability was very low. I was beginning to concede that I had somehow managed to travel back in time. Like, actually pull a Claire Randall from *Outlander*, minus the sexy Scot. My rational mind tried to ignore the evidence in front of me, while my more active irrational side kept pointing out things that were most definitely not from my time. I'd seen the newspaper in the old house. The one that had the date of eighteen fifty-two on it. Whenever I'd traveled back, it had to have happened back there. Back before I'd hidden from those people in the house. Back before I'd seen the bookcase with the immaculate but ancient books. So when, and more importantly, how? I'm sure I'd have remembered if I'd seen a time machine or inadvertently stepped into a Delorean.

The mirror! It was the one weird part of the day. After it had fallen, everything had changed.

My rational mind spoke out. *Isn't it more likely it hit you on the head, and you slipped into a coma, and this is your mind's way of dealing with it?*

I wasn't sure which was the worst option. Being in a hospital somewhere and living in my own weird imagination or actually going back in time. Everything felt so real—the gentle breeze on my cheeks, the taste of tea at the tea room, the feel of cobbles beneath my feet. My imagination just wasn't that good.

I figured my best course of action was to find the man with the white hair who'd brought me here from the Heart House. I'd ask him to take me back. If the mirror was the cause of everything, then it made sense to go back to the source and try to solve my problem from there. I tried to remember his name. He'd mentioned it in the carriage, but I'd only been half-listening. I'd been too busy gazing out of the window, trying to figure out what was going on.

Alfred something... No Albus. Just like Dumbledore. I sniggered. If I was right and not in a dream-filled coma, Dumbledore hadn't even been invented yet. J. K. Rowling wouldn't be born for over a hundred years. Maybe I should write Harry Potter and get in before her.

And maybe you should stop messing about and do something useful.

I sighed at the thoughts running through my head. This whole thing was surreal. I set off down the street and made the decision to find Albus. He'd mentioned he was late. He seemed pretty worried about it, although I couldn't remember him telling me what exactly it was he was late for.

I checked out the shop windows as I ambled down the street. One of them had handwritten posters with upcoming events. I checked them all, looking for today's date, hoping I might find something happening that Albus might be late for.

I was surprised to see one with an announcement for a croquet match up at Heart House. The date on the poster was for next Saturday. Today was Monday, according to the paper I'd seen earlier. I needed an excuse to get back in the Heart House and back to the mirror, but the thought of waiting five days filled me with horror. I couldn't stay in eighteen fifty-two for five

days. My mom would be beside herself with worry. I knew no one here and had nowhere to stay. My clothes stood out a mile, and I had no money. With a start, I realized I'd not paid for my tea at the tea room. I'd walked out in a daze and completely forgotten. It was probably just as well. My ten-pound note in my pocket with a picture of a queen that hadn't been born yet on it would have raised eyebrows, and that was the last thing I needed.

I carried on down the road, wondering what my next move was. The Heart House was way out of town, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to find my way back without help. The one man who'd helped me was nowhere to be seen, and I had no one else to turn to. I could hardly explain my predicament to anyone. They'd probably think I was a witch and try to burn me at the stake or whatever it was that people did to crazy people in this age. Because they would think I was crazy. I must have looked strange to them with my black t-shirt and faded jeans and my phone. My phone must look extremely strange to the people here.

I was lost in my own thoughts when I saw someone looking at me. The man in black from the tea room was staring at me from inside of the shop I'd stopped outside. A hat shop. The way he looked at me gave me a shiver down my spine, not to mention a catch in my throat. A chill of fear mixed with the heady feeling of exhilaration and excitement passed through me all at once. He really was stunning. But the way he looked at me, as though he could see right into my very soul, unnerved me. I took off down the street, and in my haste to get away from him and the weird feelings rushing through me, I barely noticed when the row of shops turned into a row of four-story townhouses.

I stopped to catch my breath and leaned against the gate of one. A set of stone steps led up to a beautiful red door. At either side of it, stood a couple of potted trees. These were not houses of poor people. Each one was immaculate, and each had a brass plate with the occupant's names next to

their gates. I walked along, checking the names of each, hoping for a miracle. On the fifth house, the brass plate read Albus Rabbit Esq.

I was pretty sure I'd have remembered if the man with the white hair had mentioned his last name. Rabbit was hardly common, but Albus? Surely that wasn't a common name either? There was only one way to find out. The worst that could happen was that I knocked on the wrong person's door.

After my third knock, the door opened. Albus's eyes widened as he took me in, but before I could speak, he grabbed hold of my jacket and pulled me inside, slamming the door behind him.

“Come in, come in!” he enthused, seemingly oblivious to the fact I was already in and that he’d been the one to pull me inside. “You still look pale.”

I nodded slowly, wondering what to tell him. Not that I thought I’d somehow managed to time travel. Maybe something a little less sensational.

“I think I underestimated how much I banged my head when I fell,” I began.

He didn’t wait for me to finish. Instead, he took my hand and led me to a huge room with a large table. The room had high ceilings and what looked like candlestick holders along the walls. It was also immaculately decorated. My mother would have loved this, I mused. The antiques that were just furniture in this time. She’d want to hoard the lot if she were here with me.

“You must stay for dinner. I insist! I can’t let you go home without putting some food in your belly. That should help you feel a little better.”

He pulled out a chair, and I sat down. “Actually, I don’t have a home...at least not here in town. I was passing through when I fell in front of your carriage. I’m not sure where I can go. Perhaps there is a lodging house in town?”

“Lodging house? No, no, no, that won’t do. You shall stay here as my guest.”

I opened my mouth to decline his offer, but he talked over me.

“Don’t worry, it’s all proper. I live with my housemaid. She’ll keep an eye on you. You won’t have to worry about a scandal.” His eyes twinkled as he spoke, which made me want to laugh.

“Actually, I was hoping that you’d be able to offer me a ride back to the Heart House?”

“I would, but I’m already late.” He pulled out his watch again and sighed as he read the time.

“Mrs. White,” he bellowed, and a small round woman wearing a white apron and a white maid’s hat bustled in.

“What do you want now, you old codger?” she asked. When she saw me, her cheeks turned a shade of pink, and she dropped into a low curtsy. “Now, why wouldn’t you be warning me of guests?” she admonished.

I gave her a wide smile. I’d never been curtseyed to before.

“This, Mrs. White, is Alice. She’ll be staying as our guest. After dinner, would you be so kind as to show her to the guest room?”

“Of course,” she said, giving me a wink. “I’ll bring you both some dinner out first.”

Albus gave her a wink back, and the color in her cheeks deepened. I got the feeling their relationship went a little beyond housekeeper and boss.

He glanced down at the watch that he’d just brought out of his pocket. “Thank you. Please bring it quickly. I’m already late for my date.”

“You’re always late,” she muttered under her breath as she bustled out of the room. I noticed she had a sly grin on her face as she murmured to herself.

Not five minutes later, she brought out a silver-colored cart filled with food. More food than Albus and I could eat in a month. It took more than

five minutes for her to set it all out on the table, and when she had, she took a seat herself.

Albus seemed to have completely forgotten he was late because he piled his plate high. I followed suit and took a bit of everything. It really was a feast, and everything smelled amazing. I had no idea how Mrs. White managed it on such short notice, but then again, I had a feeling they ate like this all the time. I tucked in, suddenly feeling hungry. It had been a long time since I'd last eaten. Breakfast time, I realized. My lunch, complete with birthday cake and wine, was still probably sitting on the kitchen counter of the Heart House nearly a hundred and seventy years in the future. I doubted my mother would have touched either once she realized I was missing.

I threw away the pang of sadness that threatened to take over. I was doing everything I could to get back to her. If I couldn't get back tonight, I'd go first thing tomorrow.

"It's my birthday," I suddenly announced, though I didn't know why. These people only just met me.

"Cake, Mrs. White!" Albus bellowed.

She dropped her knife and fork and hurried out the door, coming back minutes later with a huge cake.

"Are you guys magicians?" I asked, marveling at the cake.

Mrs. White laughed. "No dear, We always have cake with dinner."

That explained the wide bellies of both of them. There was enough cake to feed ten people, and I'd not even finished dinner yet.

After filling my belly, I took a small slice of cake. Mrs. White tutted and then cut a slice double the size I'd asked for and put it on a plate for me. It was a good thing I was only going to be staying here one night. Any more, and I'd be waddling out the door.

After a very long and very leisurely dinner, Albus stood and patted his belly. The look of harried stress I'd seen on him earlier had now returned.

“Excellent meal, as always, Mrs. White. Now I must be off. I’m late, you see.”

Late? I looked up at the clock on the mantelpiece. We’d been sitting at the table eating for nearly two hours. Whatever he was late for, he really was going to miss it at this rate. He’d mentioned he was late before we’d even sat down.

I helped Mrs. White put all the empty plates and leftovers back onto the cart and wash up the plates.

Afterward, she showed me to a room on the second floor. It was like nothing I’d ever seen before with a four-post bed and large windows looking out onto the street with deep red drapes to cover them.

“This is the guest room? Do you have royalty visiting much?”

Mrs. White laughed. “Albus likes his guests to feel comfortable. Is there anything I can get for you before I retire for the evening?”

I pulled the drapes open, looking down at the street as I did. In the distance, I watched as the man in black I’d seen earlier came out of his shop and locked the front door.

Curiosity got the best of me.

“I’m good, thank you. What do you know of the hatmaker here in town?”

I turned away from the window to see the color draining from Mrs. White’s face.

“You don’t want to be mixing with the likes of him. Mark my words. Stay away if you know what’s good for you.”

“Why?”

She pursed her lips, then pulled them into a thin line. “Because he’s known as the Mad Hatter, but he’s worse than that. He’s the devil himself.”

I awoke to the smell of cooking wafting up the stairs. If it wasn't for the fact it smelled delicious, I probably wouldn't have gotten out of bed at all. It was, by far, the comfiest bed I'd ever slept in.

I pulled off the robe Mrs. White had lent me the previous night and dressed in my t-shirt and jeans. Downstairs I was surprised to find Mrs. White dining alone, although there was still enough food to feed an army on the table.

"Is Albus around?" I asked, taking a plate and heaping food onto it. "I wanted to ask him something."

"No, dear. He left early to go to work. He was late, you know." She rolled her eyes and gave me a grin, which I returned. "He did leave some money and asked that I take you shopping for some new clothes. You can't be seen around town in what you're wearing now if you don't mind me saying."

"Not at all, but I can't accept his kind gesture. I really have to find my way home. I was hoping he'd be able to take me back to Heart House today."

Mrs. White tutted. "He's a very busy man, Albus Rabbit. He's the campaign manager for the mayor, and, what with the local election coming up, his days are filled with canvassing and meetings. I really don't think

he'll be able to take you to the Heart House today. Now about those clothes. I think he hoped you'd accept his generosity. He's well known around these parts and, though he wouldn't say so himself, he knows that people will judge him on the company he keeps. I don't want to sound disrespectful, but I really think you could do with something a little more...feminine."

I smiled. Back in my own time, I'd have given her a piece of my mind, but here in the eighteen hundreds, I could see she was just looking out after me and her boss. I'd not worn a dress in years, preferring to spend my day in jeans, but I looked forward to the thought of playing dress-up in the old-fashioned clothes.

"Thank you, Mrs. White. I'd love to accompany you to the dress shop."

She nodded and smiled before tucking back into her food.

Later, I found myself in a dress shop wearing nothing but a long white gown as a seamstress measured me.

"She'll need to wear it today, so nothing made to measure," Mrs. White clucked.

The seamstress, a middle-aged woman with pinched features and half-moon glasses, huffed, "I know, Mrs. White. You've already mentioned that. However, I have to make sure I get the right size garments for her. I have a limited stock of ready-made dresses, and I wouldn't want to give her the wrong size."

First on was a corset, which went over the white gown. I'd assumed the plain white gown was only to give me a little privacy to measure me in, but it seemed it was part of my attire. After the seamstress had squeezed all the air from my lungs by pulling the corset so tight I was sure I'd never be able to eat again, a thing I could only describe as a long pillow was tied above my rear.

"What's this for?" I asked, feeling utterly ridiculous.

"The bustle? It's to give a lady shape and to keep the fabric of the dress from traipsing along the ground. Have you never seen one before?"

I shook my head. My arse was big enough without giving it any help, and I wasn't sure exactly what shape I was supposed to be, but it wasn't human. Not unless I bore the name Kardashian, which I didn't.

"Where did you say you were from?" The seamstress asked, giving me a look of curiosity.

"She didn't," Mrs. White cut in. Can we hurry up? I'll need to buy some more things for Alice, and I don't want to spend all day in here. I have dinner to prepare.

The seamstress, buoyed on by the promise of more money being spent in her shop, got back to work. Finally, a dress of pale blue was draped over my head and fastened in place with an assortment of ribbons. The whole thing weighed a ton, and I was sure I'd never be able to get it all off again.

"I've popped a few things on your counter," Mrs. White said as the seamstress fussed around me. "I'd like them packaged up and sent to Mr. Rabbit's residence. I've left payment on the desk to cover everything." She then turned to me. "You look like a picture," she said, beaming. "I have a couple of errands to do. Would you mind if I headed off and met you back home later?"

I shook my head and returned her smile.

The outfit was uncomfortable, heavy, and ungainly, but I couldn't help but feel a thrill as I took in my image in the mirror. I'd never worn anything so pretty in my life. I pinned the Alice brooch my mother had given me yesterday morning to the lapel. My hairstyle didn't match, but I had a feeling there was something I could do about that.

"Here is your change," the seamstress said, handing me some money.

I thanked her and left the shop feeling slightly silly but also pretty wonderful. It would take me a while to get used to wearing the outfit. I felt completely off balance and had to keep correcting my posture to stop from falling over. The problem of what to do with my hair soon solved itself.

Even though I knew Mrs. White wouldn't approve, I couldn't deny I was intrigued by the Mad Hatter, and I needed a hat. With deliberation, I crossed the road and opened the door to the hat shop.

His creations were certainly eclectic, and though I knew practically nothing about nineteenth-century fashion, a lot of them seemed ahead of their time. Some seemed downright insane and yet beautiful at the same time. Maybe that was the reason everyone thought he was crazy.

"May I help you?"

I turned to find myself looking up into twinkling black eyes. My breath caught in my throat as I took in the man standing before me. Once I made it past his eyes, I noticed his high cheekbones and very kissable lips.

What now? Kissable? Urgh. Get a grip, Alice!

"I'm looking for a hat to match my dress," I muttered, suddenly feeling silly and nervous.

The devil, Mrs. White had called him last night. He certainly looked the part with his dark eyes and black clothing, not to mention he was sexy as sin.

"Try this one," he said, pulling a blue hat off one of the hat mannequins. He stood me in front of a mirror and put the hat on my head, tying it under my chin with a blue ribbon. His hand brushed my cheek, causing my stomach to flip.

"I was hoping I'd get to meet you," he said, bringing his hands to my arms and looking me in the eye with his reflection. "What do you think?"

"Beautiful," I murmured. I wasn't sure I was talking about the hat either. He was simply gorgeous, and his body was pressed against my back. I probably wouldn't have been able to breathe properly even if I wasn't wearing a lung crushing corset. "Why did you want to meet me?"

He moved his head forward until his lips were next to my ear. When he spoke, a shiver ran down my spine, and my insides ignited.

“Because you and I have something in common.” I turned so that I was facing him instead of his reflection.

“What?” I whispered. If this was a movie, this would be the point we moved in for a kiss.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t a movie, and I wasn’t that lucky.

The bell above the shop door tinkled, and a man with messy red hair ran in.

“Darling! That’s where you are.” For a second, I thought he must be talking to the Mad Hatter because I had never seen him before in my life, but he ran over and grabbed hold of my hand. He pulled me into a kiss. “Grandmother is looking for you. Come on.”

I was so shocked by the turn of events that I let him pull me out of the shop.

So I got the kiss after all, just not by the right person.

“What the hell...”

“Sorry,” the man said once the shop door had closed. “I shouldn’t have kissed you. I just wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“What?” I demanded, planting my hand on my hips.

He gave me an awkward grin. “I’m Kit White. Mrs. White’s grandson. I saw you with her earlier, and then I saw you go into the Mad Hatter’s shop. You shouldn’t go in there. He’s quite mad. It’s not safe for a young lady to be in there alone with him.”

He practically spat the last word. Another one that thought the hatter was insane. Intriguing.

“So you are saying you came in to save me? From...getting into trouble with the hatter?”

“Yes,” Kit said proudly.

“You kissed me,” I pointed out.

His cheeks turned redder than his hair. “Yeah, sorry about that.” He looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. “I went a little too far.”

“You think?” I huffed.

“Look. Let’s put it behind us. Why don’t I walk you back to Grandmother’s house.”

I let him, mainly because I couldn’t think of a reason for him not to, and it was only a short distance. I got the feeling he was pretty harmless and had gotten away with himself with his damsel in distress saving act. It was only when I got to the bottom of the steps to Albus’s house that I realized I’d not paid for the hat. Running out of shops without paying was becoming a bad habit.

“I didn’t pay for the hat,” I explained, pulling the change from the dress from a purse that Mrs. White had bought me earlier.

Kit took the money from my hand. “I’ll go back and pay for it for you. I wouldn’t want you to have to go back to the hatters’ alone.”

God forbid I be left alone with the sexiest man I’ve ever laid eyes on.

“Why does everyone call him mad?” I asked, genuinely interested.

Kit leaned in. “He makes things. Weird inventions. They say he’s the devil.”

“So I’ve heard,” I replied wryly.

Inventions, eh? I wonder what he could have possibly invented that made people think he was mad because, as far as I could see, the entire town was crazy, and the Mad Hatter was the only sane one in it.

““W hy don’t you show Alice the town?” Mrs. White said when she saw who I was with.
“That’s a great idea,” Kit enthused.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to spend my day wandering around with Kit. I wasn’t sure how I felt about him, but it didn’t seem that Albus was home yet, and knowing about the town might give me clues as to how I came to be here. If Kit was from here, there was a chance he knew Mrs. Heart

It turned out that apart from his weird dislike of the hatter, he was actually a fun guy to be around. We checked out the sweet shop first, and he bought me some sugary bonbons, which we shared as we walked around the town.

He came to a stop as we got to the hatter’s.

“Stay out here. I’ll go in and pay for your hat.”

I watched through the window as he marched up to the counter and slammed down the money for the hat. The hatter took the money and put it into a till, but he didn’t look at Kit as he did. His eyes were on me the whole town. I couldn’t turn away. I was transfixed by him. I almost didn’t notice when Kit came out of the shop.

“What can you tell me about Mrs. Heart,” I asked once we’d left the hatter. Anything to get the enigmatic man from my mind and try to forget

the whisper of a breath I could still feel on my ear.

“Oh, ho. Don’t get Albus started on her. I wouldn’t mention her name in his house if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“She’s terrible. Because she’s rich, she thinks she owns the whole village, and that includes the mayor.”

“Albus works for the mayor, right?”

Kit nodded. “That’s right. He’s fiercely supportive of the mayor, but Mrs. Heart always pays him off to get her own way. It infuriates Albus to no end, but what can the mayor do? He can’t afford to turn down such generous donations to the village, even if it makes Mrs. Heart even more obnoxious than she is to begin with.”

It was interesting to hear about the ancestor of the woman whose house I’d been packing up only the day before, but it didn’t help me get any closer to home.

“Do you know anything about a mirror she has in the house?”

“Mirror? No, I can’t say I do. What interest do you have in her mirror?”

I shrugged. “I just heard she has an interesting mirror. One with vines and roses molded into the frame.”

Kit let out a low whistle. “I’ve not heard about the mirror, but she is well-known around these parts for being completely unreasonable when it comes to roses.”

“Really? In what way?” I looked over to Kit and noticed freckles peppering his nose. He was a good looking man. Not in the same league as the devastatingly handsome hatter, but he was cute in a boy next door kind of way. I noticed his hair color wasn’t quite even. The red had strands of different shades, giving it a uniquely stripey effect.

“She made the mayor pull up all the white roses throughout the village a few years ago. Insisted that only red roses be allowed to grow. Albus nearly had a fit over it, but of course, the mayor capitulated. It was his first term as

mayor, and he didn't want to block his cash cow so early on in his term. Not that he'll have the same problem this time around."

"Oh?"

"She's finally doing what she's been threatening for years. She's running for mayor. Fancy getting something from the tearoom?"

"She can't be that bad, surely?" I asked as we crossed the road to the tearoom.

Inside, the woman behind the counter glowered at me.

"I forgot to pay for my tea here yesterday," I whispered to Kit as he ordered two teas and two scones and clotted cream.

"I'd like to pay for my friend's tea from yesterday too."

She glowered at him, but she took the money all the same.

"I'm not usually in the habit of failing to pay for things," I said as we took a seat. "Despite what it might look like. I just don't have any money right now, and it seems my memory is not what it could be."

"Don't worry," Kit replied jovially. "My grandmother told me about your situation. What she didn't tell me was how you came to be outside Mrs. Heart's house without any money and with strange clothes on."

It wasn't something I really wanted to get into. The less he knew, the better. I trusted him, but he was quick to call people crazy, and I was crazier than most. At least, my story was. "My mother is interested in one of a kind furniture pieces," I said, not entirely lying. "I heard of the mirror and wanted to check it out for her. Unfortunately, the carriage that brought me left when I went up to the house, and I lost my money when I fell when Albus nearly ran into me."

"So you met Mrs. Heart?"

I shook my head. "I don't think she was in. I should have called ahead."

"Called ahead?"

Damn. "I mean, sent a letter to announce my intentions." Thank goodness I'd watched a couple of episodes of Downton Abbey so I could

speaking in “old fashioned.” My mother would be rolling her eyes at me if she was here.

“You are in luck, if meeting Mrs. Heart could ever be called lucky. She’s having a croquet match on Saturday to raise funds for her mayoral campaign. Not that she needs the money, but it is a way for her to win over the villagers with promises she’ll forget once she becomes mayor.”

The tearoom woman came over with our teas and scones. This time she placed my tea down nicely in front of me. I took a sip. “It sounds like you expect her to win.”

Kit sighed and spread jam from a small pot on his scone. “Having a woman mayor is unprecedented, but she has the talk, and she definitely has the money. I wouldn’t want to rule her out. The current mayor is well-meaning, but he’s weak. Albus does most of the work if truth be told.”

He moved on from the jam and on to the clotted cream. “I really don’t want her to get in. She’s a foul woman, and when she doesn’t get her own way, she punishes people.”

I thought back to the woman’s voice in the Heart House before I left. She’d been talking about chopping people’s heads off. I gulped and downed my tea.

Albus didn't come home until way after midnight, so I found myself still in 1852 for yet another night.

He was, however, there when I went down for breakfast in the morning.

"Alice! You look splendid!"

I'd put on a different dress to the one I'd worn yesterday. This one was a cherry red. I still got a thrill from the fancy clothing despite the hour it had taken me to put it on.

"Thank you."

"I was wondering if you'd be able to help me with a little job today. I'll pay you for your time, of course."

"You are offering me a job?"

Albus nodded, passing me the teapot. "Only short term, but I know you don't have any money, and I would imagine you would prefer to buy your own things."

Was he upset because of all the clothes Mrs. White had bought for me yesterday? I didn't think so. He'd given me the money and insisted I spend it on clothes. I got the feeling he was genuinely concerned that I might feel bad about taking his money. Perhaps he saw my desire to be independent. I'd planned to ask him to take me to the Heart House, but I owed him for

his generosity. I could go this evening and help him today. “Anything I can do to help. But I insist on quarter pay. I would like to contribute to the beautiful clothes you bought for me yesterday.”

He seemed surprised, but he didn’t call me on it. “As you wish. The job is terribly dull, I’m afraid, but it is also very important. I’m sure Kit told you that I’m trying to help the mayor keep his rightful place as the mayor of Mimsey-on-Liddell. I need canvassers to go out into the village and hand out these flyers.”

He handed me a stack of flyers with the name of the mayor on them and a drawing of a man I recognized. It was the man I’d seen sleeping in the tea room days ago. His name was Mayor Dormus.

As though just talking about him had conjured him up, he walked through the door into the dining room followed by Mrs. white.

“Look who is here,” Mrs. White beamed.

Albus stood and shook the mayor’s hand. “Mayor, please let me introduce you to my ward, Alice. She’s agreed to help us canvass the village.”

Dormus yawned, then held his hand out for me to shake. “Pleased to have you on board.”

“Time for work, Mrs. White,” Albus said, slapping his thighs. “You’ll be okay handing the flyers out and asking the village shops to put them in the windows, Alice?”

I nodded and picked up the flyers from the table.

Ten minutes later, I found myself back on the main street. The whole place had been washed in a sea of red. Everywhere I looked was covered in hearts. The whole village looked like an explosion in a valentine card factory. Every shop already had Mrs. Heart’s face grinning out from it under the words “Vote Heart.” She had rounded cheeks and beady eyes and, for some unfathomable reason, wore a small crown atop a bun in her hair. I wondered if she really did wear a crown or if she’d merely asked the artist

to draw one in. Mayor Dormus had his work cut out for him. Every lamppost had red streamers blowing in the breeze.

I walked down the street slowly. The hatter's shop with the black sign with gold lettering called to me, but I purposely walked down the opposite side of the street and went into the tearoom first.

The woman scowled at me as I walked in. She obviously hadn't forgiven me for not paying for my tea that first day.

Luckily for me, she seemed to like Mrs. Heart less than she liked me, so she happily agreed to put Mayor Dormus's poster in the window.

I moved along the parade of shops, going in and out of each, doing my best to sell Mayor Dormus despite knowing very little about him beyond the fact he always looked sleepy when I saw him.

The last shop on this side was a tobacco shop. I stepped inside and was immediately enveloped in smoke.

Coughing, I wafted my hand in front of my face and made my way to the counter. Various cigars and loose tobacco products took up the whole space.

A small man with dull eyes and wisps of hair puffed on a hookah. "Whooo are yoooo," he drawled, dragging his words out.

"I'm here on behalf of Mayor Dormus," I coughed. "I was wondering if you'd consent to putting his flyer up in your window."

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. It was clear to see he was high. If I spent much longer in the shop, I was going to get high too.

"Yes, but whoooo are yoooo?"

"Alice Tenniel," I coughed out, suddenly feeling dizzy. What was he smoking? Not tobacco, that was for sure, or at least, not just tobacco. "May I put a flyer in the window, please?"

"I don't know," he wheezed.

"You don't know?" I was beginning to feel annoyed as well as light-headed. "Aren't you the proprietor of this shop?"

“I am, but who are yoooooooo?”

I dropped the flyer on the counter and ran to the door. Outside I heaved great lungfuls of air. Slowly, my brain began to clear.

Next stop, the hatter’s shop. I’d purposely left it til last in the hopes I could spend a little longer there.

“Hey Alice,” A voice called from across the road. Kit. “Heading home? I’ll walk with you.”

I smiled politely, feeling a little sick. Once again, he’d thwarted me from visiting with the hatter.

A long table with twenty chairs along one side and twenty on the opposite had been set up in the local park. It was my third day in 1852, and still, no one had enough time to take me back to the Heart House. So here I was, waiting for instructions for what was shaping up to be the weirdest political rally I'd ever seen

"So what exactly am I supposed to do?" I asked Kit.

"This half of the table is for Mrs. Heart and her crew," Kit began pointing to the half-covered in a red tablecloth and red roses. Halfway down, the tablecloth turned blue and had no other decoration. "We sit over there on the blue side. First, Mrs. Heart and Dormus give their speeches, then they sit on their respective sides with their people. The public then gets to line up on the opposite side and speak to us about various issues."

"But I don't know anything about any issues," I replied, feeling nervous about the whole thing. "I've only been in the village three days."

"I wouldn't worry. Neither Heart nor Dormus knows much either. It's all mostly bluster on both sides."

When he saw that I didn't look convinced, he added, "I'll be right next to you if you need help, and here's a cheat sheet full of information."

He handed me a piece of paper with Dormus's main policies scribbled on it. I sat down in my spot and tried to memorize it all as the park began to

fill with people.

Mrs. Heart arrived with a whole army of people, all wearing red. Every single one of them had a red heart pin fixed to their lapel. In contrast, Dormus had us. And by “us” I mean Albus, Kit, and me. The rest of the table on the blue side was empty. It made me wonder how he ever got elected in the first place.

While Mrs. Heart took to the stage, Dormus slept, his head flat out on the long table. Next to him, Albus became more agitated with each passing second and alternated between writing notes and elbowing Dormus in the side to wake him up. While all this was going on, the Eatme/Drinkme Tearoom supplied endless fresh tea to everyone at the table.

Mrs. Heart was a born politician. What she lacked in decency and logic, she made up for with pure showmanship and lies. Even I, who didn’t know the village at all, could see through her loud ramblings, but the crowd was lapping it up. A whole group of her people had interspersed themselves in the crowd and were yelling and cheering every time Heart made a point.

I clapped loudly as Dormus took to the stage. A few of the crowd clapped, too, though not at the same level as for Heart. I scanned the crowd as he began his speech, pausing every few seconds or so to yawn.

And then I saw him. The hatter. He was standing at the back, watching Dormus with interest. I watched him marveling at how gorgeous he looked in his smart black suit. Anyone else wearing it would come off looking like an undertaker, but he managed to look like a male model. A dark, brooding kind of male model, but a male model all the same. I couldn’t keep my eyes off him. Or at least, I couldn’t until his eyes flicked over to mine. I held his gaze for a second before I felt heat flushing my cheeks. At that point, I looked down at the cheat sheet Kit had given me and tried to concentrate on what Dormus was saying.

Once Dormus had finished his long, droning speech to little fanfare, he took his place next to Mrs. Heart at the table. The crowd gravitated over to

us. As expected, the lines to speak to Heart and Dormus were the longest, Heart's the longest by far. But some people deigned to speak to the members of their support staff. My own line was six or seven long. Next to me, Kit's line was at least thirty people long, and already he had a grin on his face as he launched into the party spiel.

As the first person in my own line, a middle-aged woman with her hair in a wispy bun, sat down, I checked my cheat sheet.

The very top line said smile. I plastered on my best fake smile and gave her my best "How can I help you?"

She asked me questions that were pretty simple to answer, mainly because Dormus had only just mentioned them in his speech minutes before. I recited back to her what Dormus had said and hoped that she wouldn't want me to elaborate. Luckily, she did not.

As the second person sat opposite me, Hatter joined my line. Of all the lines to pick, he chose mine. My heart did the rumba around my chest before I remembered that my line was by far the shortest. Had he picked my line for that reason, or was it something else? I couldn't help but hope that he wanted to speak to me personally, not that I could articulate to myself why.

"Are you going to tell me about taxes or not?" the man in front of me grumbled, bringing me back down to earth.

This was one part of the cheat sheet I'd memorized.

"Taxes are unfortunately something we all have to pay, and yes, they will be increasing slightly this coming year," I began, reciting the cheat sheet verbatim. "However, Mr. Dormus and his council are doing everything they can to keep the taxes as low as possible for all the residents of Liddell-on-Mimsey. The extra taxes will be going toward a new wing in the hospital and to badly needed lamplighters."

"Mrs. Heart says she is going to slash taxes completely," the man grumbled.

Had she? I'd not been paying enough attention. No wonder the crowd had been so worked up and excited during her speech.

At the end of the line, Hatter gave me a sly, sexy smile that had my toes curling with excitement.

I looked the man in front of me directly in the eyes. "She's obviously lying!"

His eyes widened in surprise, and I got an elbow in the ribs from Kit. He leaned toward me and whispered in my ear. "You can't call the opposition a liar, even if she is. Try to be a little more diplomatic."

At the end of the line, I saw Hatter chuckling at my predicament. Had he heard what I'd said? Probably.

I licked my lips and began again. "What I mean is, without taxes, the lamps will remain dark every night. Cutting taxes will also cut healthcare, road maintenance, and upkeep for this park. Your taxes go toward a great many things. Without them, the a great many people will lose their jobs.+ What is it you do?"

"I'm a sweep!" he said, folding his arms. "I do most of the houses in the village, the town hall, the school, and all the public buildings."

A sweep? What was that? "Oh, a chimney sweep. How do you feel about losing most of your work?"

"What do you mean?" the man eyed me warily.

"Well, without taxes, the town hall will have to close. The school, too, because no one will be able to pay the teachers. I would imagine a lot of people who have lost their jobs because there were no taxes to pay for them will decide to sweep their own chimneys."

The man's face fell. "Mrs. Heart is rich. She'll pay for it all!" He didn't sound very convinced of his own words.

"Do you really believe that?"

"Well...no..." He got up and left. Next to me, Kit whispered, "Well done."

My smile was genuine as the next person sat down.

I did my best with every person, trying to convince them that Dormus was the best person for the job. It was difficult to hear anything over Heart's booming voice. Her presence filled the park, and everything that came out of her mouth was nonsensical, but it was what the people wanted to hear. I dreaded what would happen if she did get in. There would be a lot of disappointed people.

Then it was his turn. I could barely breathe as he took the seat opposite me.

His eyes twinkled with mirth. "Good job with the sweep. I saw him take his red heart pin off and throw it in the trash before leaving the park."

"Really?"

I was transfixed by him. The way he spoke, the way he looked at me.

"It was magnificent."

I felt the blush rise to my cheeks again. "How can I help you then, Mr...?"

"You can call me the Mad Hatter. Everyone around here does."

So he knew. What's more, he didn't seem to mind. "So how can I help you, Mr. Hatter. It seems that you have already made a decision as to whom you are voting for."

"Ah, I won't be voting. Neither side appeals to me."

I was surprised. Not that he wasn't voting. I wouldn't particularly want to vote for either of the candidates either, but I was surprised he admitted it.

"So why are you here?"

He leaned forward and whispered in my ear, much like Kit had earlier. Except Kit whispering hadn't sent a shockwave through my body. It hadn't set all my senses tingling with anticipation. His breath on my neck hadn't made me shiver with lust.

Kit's whisper had been only a whisper. Hatter's was a promise of something else.

“I need to speak with you privately. Come to my shop tonight at midnight.”

He stood up and walked away before I could respond, but the lingering feelings he’d stirred up took a lot longer to leave.

“What did he want?” Kit asked when Hatter was out of hearing range.

“Not much,” I lied. “He wanted to let me know he was voting for Dormus.”

The clock hands couldn't move fast enough as I sat at the dinner table. Mrs. White had put on a feast fit for a king for Dormus, who had joined us. I thought that the dinner was supposed to be a celebration of how well the day had gone, but as far as I could tell, Dormus had been trampled by the enigmatic Heart. Not that anyone seemed to notice. Denial was strong in this lot. Maybe they were just pretending it had gone well for the excuse to eat the amazing food.

I ate slowly, listening to them all retell the day to Mrs. White, who hadn't been able to attend, being stuck home as she was, cooking for us all.

"I couldn't believe it when the Hatter showed up." Kit said, giving me a wink.

"He didn't!" exclaimed Mrs. White, holding her hand to her chest. "What did he want?"

All eyes turned to me. I gave them the same answer I'd given Kit earlier.

"He told me he was voting for you, Mr. Dormus."

Dormus almost choked on his food. "I'm not sure I want the likes of him voting for me. He's a bad lot."

I wanted to point out that he needed all the help he could get vote-wise after today, but I kept my mouth shut. I wondered why everyone hated the

hatter so much. What could he possibly have done to enrage so many people?

I hoped that they'd keep talking about him, but they'd already finished with the topic and moved on to something else. I smiled and nodded when I was supposed to and then excused myself early.

With nothing to do, I paced up and down my bedroom, my mind whirring through all the possible reasons Hatter would have to want to speak to me. He barely knew me. He didn't know me at all, actually. Our only significant amount of time together was when I bought a hat from him, and we'd hardly had a deep and meaningful conversation then. I'd barely said more than two words to him.

By the time the clock hit eleven-thirty, I'd come up with a hundred different reasons he'd want to speak to me, each more implausible than the last. They ranged from him wanting to ravish me on a pile of hats in his backroom to him being a serial killer. I knew which one the townsfolk would find more likely. They all hated him, but I couldn't see it. He was mysterious. Deliciously so, but the devil himself? I wasn't so sure. Still, it was with a great deal of trepidation that I sneaked out of the house just before midnight. I'd elected to wear my jeans and t-shirt instead of the restrictive dresses purchased for me. I wanted to be able to run quickly if what everyone said about him was true. The old fashioned dresses didn't lend themselves to a quick escape.

The street was empty, with the smell of the gas lights lingering in the air.

The hatter's shop's lights were off, but I could see a sliver of light coming from the back room.

I held my hand to the door and stopped.

What was I doing? I was a lone woman in the middle of the night about to knock on the door of a man that everyone said was mad. It wasn't like he even disputed it.

But then I knocked. If I hadn't, I'd have thought of nothing else. I couldn't keep him out of my mind. Curiosity was burning me up, not to mention excitement.

The back door opened. His hair was backlit by the light of the shop, a tousled black mess on top of the sexiest silhouette I'd ever seen.

He opened the door.

I stood unmoving, suddenly afraid to go in. His lips quirked into a smile.

"Are you coming in, or shall we chat here on the doorstep, Alice?"

"Chat?" That's what he wanted? To talk? I wasn't sure which was the bigger emotion—relief or disappointment. I felt a healthy dose of both.

"I never told you my name," I pointed out.

He pointed to the Alice broach I'd pinned to my shirt.

I let out a sigh of relief and mentally berated myself.

I stepped over the threshold and waited for him to lock the door behind me. Whatever it was he planned to do with me, there was no going back now. He slipped the key into his pocket and took my hand in his.

I let him lead me to his backroom, where he shut the door there too.

The room smelled faintly of glue. Parts of hats were everywhere. Fabric was piled up in reams along one wall, while scraps of it filled the counters and shelves. A couple of head busts had works in progress on them.

"Would you like tea?" he asked.

It was so innocent of a question. Would someone who planned to murder me offer me tea? I didn't think so.

"Yes, please."

He lit a stove and put an old black kettle on it. I walked up and down the shelves marveling at the half-made hats. I came to a stop at some sketches. Most were of hats. Different designs, but one was of me, wearing the hat I'd bought the day before. He'd captured my likeness perfectly—the look of excitement I'd had on my face when he'd put the hat on my head

and whispered in my ear the first time. He'd told me we had something in common. I couldn't begin to guess what.

"This is me," I said, holding the picture up.

"It is." He handed me a cup of tea. "You looked beautiful that day. Out of place in a strange world, but beautiful, nonetheless."

"What do you mean by out of place? You said we have something in common."

"And so we do."

His eyes found mine, and once again, I found myself transfixed by him. Spellbound by the look in his eyes.

I almost dropped my tea when he started to undress.

First, the topcoat. He pulled it off lazily before folding it and placing it on the side table. I thought he might stop there, but he kept on undressing, slowly unbuttoning his waistcoat. He pulled a pocket watch from his pocket and placed it next to the topcoat before following it with the waistcoat. I swallowed as he unfastened his cufflinks and placed them next to the watch.

Then his shirt. He was unbuttoning his shirt, and it was all I could do to watch him do it.

My breath caught in my throat as he pulled the shirt open to reveal sculpted abs and tattoo-covered pecs.

My mouth fell open as he slowly revealed the full extent of the tattoo. He was so utterly beautiful that it took me a few moments to get over myself and see what it was he was trying to show me.

He hadn't been undressing to try to seduce me.

More's the pity.

He was showing me the tattoo, which clearly showed the name of a band. A band that wouldn't exist for over a hundred years.

"You're from the future!" I gasped.

He smiled at my realization. "And so are you."

“I came through the mirror two years ago,” he explained. “I’m from 2058. What about you?”
“2021,” I replied, feeling dazed.

He sipped at his tea as he spoke. His chest was still on show, and I felt myself unable to concentrate on anything else.

“I set up this shop as a cover, but what I really like to do is invent things. Things that have already been invented, but just not in this time.”

“That’s cheating!” I pointed out.

He grinned. “So it is, but the people don’t know that. Unfortunately, they aren’t interested in what I have to offer. They all think it’s the work of the devil.”

I snorted. “That’s what Mrs. White thinks you are.”

He nodded, and his face became serious. “They all call me that, most behind my back, but some to my face. I’ve stopped inventing now. They don’t want their lives to be more comfortable. So, I concentrate on hats.”

“People will buy hats from the devil?” I asked, quirking the edges of my mouth up. Now that he’d explained his situation, I felt more comfortable in his presence. Not entirely. He was still the sexiest man I’d ever laid eyes on, and he did have a look of danger and mystery about him, but at least, I could understand why.

“There’s no one else in town that makes them. I make good hats. All the ladies clamor after my creations, despite hating who makes them.”

I bet they did. I’d also bet they didn’t hate him as much as they made out. They weren’t blind. It can’t have escaped their notice just how good-looking he was. Of course, they couldn’t say that. So, instead, they bought hats.

“You’ve been here for two years?” I asked to get my mind off how sexy he was. “Why haven’t you tried going back?”

He shrugged. “I did try a couple of times. The mirror was impassible from the future side in 2058.”

My heart fell. “I’m sorry. That’s my fault. I smashed the 2021 version of the mirror when I went through. That means it’s smashed in 2058 too.

The thought of me never being able to get back to my mother filled me with fear. I couldn’t stay here forever. She’d die without me. I’d die without her. We were all each other had.

“I’m not so sure. When I tried the first time, there was something there; it was just impassible. I think the mirror was in storage or something. I could see something but couldn’t get through.”

It didn’t make sense. Not that time traveling through a mirror made sense at the best of times.

“That’s how Heart makes her money. I think she can move to whatever time she likes. She gets information and comes back and gambles on the future. Wins every time.”

“You said you tried twice?”

He drained his tea and placed the teacup back on the side table. His eyes darkened as though he was remembering something awful.

“I did try once more. I moved some of the molding on the frame. It’s full of hidden switches. Anyway, I don’t know what I did, but I ended up in some weird time zone. The plants talked. The flowers sang.”

I furrowed my brows. “Are you sure you went through the mirror or just spent an afternoon in the cigar shop?”

He laughed. It was totally unexpected, the way he laughed right from his belly. I’d expected something more refined.

“I assure you I don’t frequent the cigar shop often. I find opium doesn’t help with my creative process.”

So that’s what the cigar shop owner had been smoking. Opium. Wow!

“The people around here think I’m strange when all it is, is that I know things about the future. I figure that the place I saw was a different time still. Maybe the plants were part of an interactive museum exhibit. It’s not unheard of. Look at Disneyland.”

“I’ve never been,” I said idly.

“Neither have I, but you get my point. Mysteries are only mysterious until they can be explained. Then they are rather mundane like everything else.”

“I need to get home,” I said. “I can’t stay here like you have. My mother will be worried. I’ve already been here for days.” I felt my resolve begin to crumble. If what he said was true, I’d never get home. I’d heard the mirror smash in 2021, even if I’d not seen it. Tears began to prickle at the corners of my eyes.

He moved forward and brought me to him, enveloping me in a hug. I rested my head against hard, bare chest, breathing him in. He felt warm and smelled divine. At that moment, I’d happily have stayed in his arms forever as I shed salty tears down his chest. A smash had us pulling apart. Looking down at the floor, I saw the cup I’d just dropped smashed into a hundred pieces.

“Sorry.” I’d gotten so carried away, I’d completely forgotten I was holding the damn thing.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it.” He quickly brushed up the cup and mopped the tea up with a cloth.

“We can try again.” He said, throwing the lot into a bin.

Try hugging again. Oh, yes, please! Oh, he was talking about going through the mirror. “We?”

He nodded. “I’ve never tried going through with someone else before. If nothing else, it will be interesting to see what’ll happen. Hopefully, we’ll get you home in the process.”

I nodded, wiping the tears from my eyes and feeling foolish for crying in front of him. I wasn’t usually much of a crier.

“Don’t you have someone to go home to?” *A girlfriend, perhaps? A supermodel wife and ten kids?*

“Nope, but then there’s nothing here for me either. I think you should go back to Rabbit’s house for now, and I’ll try to come up with a plan to get us both into Heart’s house.”

With great reluctance, I left him and headed back to Albus’s house. As I lay down in my bed, I wondered if I’d ever get home, and I wondered more why I hadn’t tried to kiss him when I had the chance.

“I have a few moments to escort you to Mrs. Heart’s this morning,” Albus said.

We were all in the town hall, helping Dormus sort through papers, a job that sorely needed doing. Nothing was organized properly.

Kit gave me a look that clearly said he didn’t want me to go. “Surely, you can take her another time,” he piped up. “We have so much to do here.”

“It’s ok, Albus. I’m more than happy to go another time.”

Beside me, Kit visibly relaxed.

“I’d really like to help you get ready for the election.”

Albus nodded and went back to his own stack of papers while Dormus slept on his.

There was no point in me going to the Heart House now. Not without Hatter. I needed him to get in. I’d not put much thought into how to get into the house before last evening, but I didn’t think I’d be able to do it alone. Luckily, I wouldn’t have to. Hatter would be by my side. I couldn’t hide the ear to ear grin that split my face every time I thought about the previous night. I held onto the memory like a delicious secret that I knew I’d unwrap over and over again. There had been chemistry between us. I’d felt it, and I knew he had too. Sure, he’d taken his shirt off for a reason, but he had no

reason to keep it off. And he'd drawn me. I'd not seen any sketches of other women. Only hats.

"What are you grinning at?" Kit asked, nudging me out of my fantasy of Hatter taking off more than his shirt.

He matched my grin, although I didn't know why. Every time I saw him, his smile split his face. He was perpetually happy. I envied him, or I would if I wasn't so damn happy myself.

"You are one to talk. You remind me of a Cheshire cat."

"I'm just happy you are staying a little longer, that's all."

I felt a little sorry for him. His crush on me was obvious, but I couldn't return it. He was a good-looking guy, but he didn't exude the raw sexuality that Hatter did. He was too good for his own good. I guess I was one of those women that liked a bad boy. Not that Hatter was bad. He just liked everyone to think he was.

Almost as soon as the thought came to mind, Hatter appeared at the door, as though I'd conjured him up just by thinking of him.

"What do you want?" Albus asked, not even bothering to disguise his dislike of the man.

"I'm here to talk to Alice."

"No!" Kit said, standing up.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Albus said.

Hatter walked right past him.

"I wasn't asking permission," he barked.

Kit blocked him, his arms folded and the perpetual grin finally falling from his face. He was brave, but there was no way he'd beat Hatter in a fight. I'd seen Hatter's muscles.

"It's ok," I said, standing and putting my hand on Kit's arm. "I'll go speak to him and come right back."

Kit turned and pulled me to one side. "I don't like it. I can't rightfully let you go with him. He's dangerous, Alice."

I looked around. "The window," I said, pointing to it. "I'll stand outside there so you can see I'll come to no harm. I promise if he does anything you don't like, you can come outside and hit him for me."

Kit's eyebrows momentarily went up, but then they lowered into a frown.

"I don't like it, Alice."

"No one said you had to like it," Hatter said, grabbing my hand and taking me outside.

"No wonder you have the reputation you do," I said as I stood outside the window. I didn't need to look through it to know Kit was watching us.

"They expect nothing else," he murmured. "I gave them exactly what they wanted. Kit's in love with you. Did you know?"

"I had an inkling he had a crush."

"A man with a crush doesn't stand up to someone who would kick his ass in a fight. A man in love would."

I blushed at the thought of it. "Is that what you came here for? Why should you care if Kit likes me or not?"

This was the perfect moment to declare his own passion for me, but he didn't. Instead, his expression changed to one of sadness. Not at all what I expected.

When he spoke, his voice was low and quiet. "I can't go with you. I'm sorry."

My whole world suddenly crumbled around me. I'd gone from thinking he was here to declare his undying love for me, and he'd hit me with this instead. "What do you mean? You were all for it last night."

At least, he had the decency to look ashamed. "I know I did, and I'm sorry. It was a foolish thing to promise. I've already told you what happened when I went through the mirror. It's dangerous."

"Singing flowers are dangerous?"

“I’d never thought about it before last night. I’d assumed that I’d gone to a future I didn’t understand.”

“The Disneyland thing.”

“Right, but what if I didn’t travel to the future and miraculously ended up in a happy theme park? What if it wasn’t this world at all. What if it was a parallel universe.”

I laughed before realizing he was being serious. “That’s impossible.”

“If anyone had told you they were a time traveler last week, you’d have thought that was impossible too.”

He had a point. The whole thing was completely insane, whichever way I looked at it.

“I can’t go alone. I’d never make it into the Heart House without you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again and turned to walk away.

I felt the tears prickle again as he strode off down the street, but I wouldn’t let them fall.

If he wanted to live in fear, then that was on him. I wasn’t going to give up until I got home. I’d go it alone. I was planning on doing that without him before last night anyway.

“Did he hurt you?” Kit said, running up beside me.

“No.”

“I swear to god, I’ll kill him if he laid a finger on you.”

Kit was so earnest. It was sweet, really. “He didn’t...he won’t. I’m not going to see him again.”

This seemed to placate Kit a little. He draped his arm around my shoulder, and I let him. We both headed back inside to work. I needed to come up with another plan to get into the Heart House. Thanks to Hatter’s promises, I’d lost another day in the past.

The croquet match at the Heart House was my one chance to get access to the house. When I'd first seen the flyers for it, I'd not thought for a second I'd still be stuck in 1852 for so long, but here I was. One more day and I'd be able to go home.

I spent the day back in the town hall in much the same way I had the day before. The place really was a mess. I felt sorry for the residents here. Mrs. Heart was a nightmare, but snoozy Dormus was almost as bad. It was a miracle anything ever got done. I had a suspicion that Albus did most of the work behind the scenes while Dormus was the public face of the whole project.

"You're quiet today," Kit pointed out. "Penny for your thoughts."

I'd spent the morning going between thinking of kissing Hatter and slapping him. There really was no in-between. I wanted to do both, and, at the same time, I never wanted to see him again.

"I was thinking we should go to the croquet match at the Heart House."

"Infiltrate the enemy's base," Kit replied in mock horror. "I like it."

"It's open to anyone, so she can't stop us. I was thinking we could use it as an excuse to see what lies she is spinning now."

"I'll see what Albus thinks."

“It’s an interesting idea,” Albus said after being told my theory. “She won’t like it. I’d go so far as to say, she’d hate it.”

“All the more reason for us to go,” I said.

Albus smiled. “Let’s do it.”

The next day I wore my light blue dress along with the hat from Hatter’s.

Four of us, Kit, Dormus, Mrs. White, and I sat in the carriage while Albus sat up above driving it.

It was nice to see Mrs. White out of the kitchen, where she seemed to spend most of her time. As per the flyers, there would be food provided, so she had no need to cook for everyone.

My heart clenched as we pulled into the driveway of the Heart House half an hour after leaving Mimsey-on-Liddell.

Red streamers decorated the driveway up to the main house.

The gardens had been completely transformed since I’d last seen them. Tables of food had been laid out, and chairs had been left out for people to sit on.

Paper hearts were everywhere. Among the roses decorating the front of the house, and in between the plates of food. Mrs. Heart’s people were everywhere. I could tell them a mile off with their red waistcoats and heart lapel pins.

The place heaved with people. If all of them voted for Heart, Dormus would have no chance of winning.

I stepped down and looked for Mrs. Heart herself. I saw her in the distance playing croquet with a number of other people.

And then I saw him by the food tables. I wasn’t expecting Hatter to be here, but he was unmistakable in his black top hat. I made a note to stay away from him. The grounds were big enough to stay away from him. I needed to figure out a way to get into the house anyway and didn’t need any distractions.

“Would you like to get something to eat?” Kit asked, taking my arm in his.

“I was thinking of seeing the house, actually. It’s awfully large.”

“And closed to the public, I suspect. Remember she lives there. She’s not likely to let people inside.”

“Right.”

“How about we go for an amble around the rose garden instead? I’ve heard her roses are the best in the county, and I doubt I’ll ever get a chance to see them up close again.”

We left the others and headed to the rose garden.

A path weaved through hundreds of rose bushes. Every single one of them was red. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything else, but it was still strange to see.

“I wonder why she likes red so much,” I mused as we walked through the garden.

“I suppose it’s something to do with her name,” Kit replied. “Red hearts and all that.”

We walked a little further, and then Kit stopped suddenly.

“What’s the matter? Are you alright?”

Kit turned to face me and took my hand in his. He gulped before talking.

“We’ve known each other a little while now, and I just wanted to let you know it’s been a pleasure.”

Uh oh. He’d brought me here away from everyone to tell me about his crush on me. I could see by his nerves that this wasn’t easy for him.

“I’ve enjoyed working with you,” I replied, putting the emphasis on working.

“Me too, but it’s more than that.” He took my other hand.

I couldn’t let him do this. There was no way I shared his feelings. I was going to crush him.

“Alice, I...”

“I’m sorry, Kit,” I said, pulling my hands back. “I really must find a bathroom. We can finish this conversation when I get back, ok?”

It was the coward’s way out. I wasn’t going to the bathroom. I was going to the mirror, and I wasn’t coming back. One way or another, I was getting out of here.

“I’ll wait here for you,” Kit called after me.

Guilt ate at me as I ran to the house.

I had a feeling that outdoor portable public toilets weren’t a thing, which meant Mrs. Heart would have to open her house. Needing the toilet was the perfect excuse to get inside. I rounded the house to the front, where a man in a suit stood guarding the door. I made to head toward him but was stopped by someone grabbing my arm.

I turned to find myself face to face with Hatter.

“I know what you are doing,” he said, his voice harsh.

“So? It’s hardly any of your concern.”

His lips formed a grim line. “It is my concern. I feel responsible.”

“You don’t need to,” I shot back. “I was planning on doing this before I even met you, so you can shove your concern up your ass.”

“Alice, please...”

I was angry now. “Stop it. You’ve made your decision, and I’ve made mine. I can’t spend my life here scared of the what-ifs.”

“I just don’t want you getting hurt. I have a bad feeling about it. You know nothing about the mirror.”

“And neither do you. You’re just scared. It’s pathetic, really.”

His face sagged, and yet, I couldn’t stop. “I’m going. I’m going whether you like it or not because I don’t have to answer to you. Why don’t you go back to your party?”

Ok, so it wasn’t exactly his party, but I was pissed at him.

“I hope you get home,” he said, his voice quiet. I watched him walk away.

My heart had barely gotten back to a normal level when Kit appeared at my side.

“Why is it that every time I see you with the Mad Hatter, you are arguing? What hold does he have on you?”

He had my heart. That was the hold he had on me. Despite my anger at him, despite that we’d fought more than had nice conversations, I couldn’t help the way I felt about him.

“Nothing,” I replied simply. I wasn’t sure Kit bought it, but then again, neither did I. “I still need the bathroom,” I croaked out.

I ran from Kit and headed into the house past the guard who let me in without a problem. I was barely through the door when the tears began to flow. I couldn’t help it. I’d fallen in love with the devil himself. Maybe not literally, but he may as well have been.

He was no good for me. No good at all. I ran up the stairs to where I knew the mirror was. The door was locked again, but I was past caring. I kicked out. The wood around the frame splintered, so I kicked again until the door flew open. Just as it had before, a strange breeze blew through the room. This time, I knew why. It was the mirror. I looked at myself, with my tear-streaked face and puffy eyes, I looked awful, but it didn’t matter. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and stepped through the mirror.

As soon as I opened my eyes, I knew I was in the wrong place...or wrong time.

The room was dark, but I could see that it wasn't because of the time of day. The window was caked in dirt, so only a small amount of daylight shone through. The electric light above my head flickered. I'd traveled into the future if there was electricity, but how far? The bare light bulb held no clues, though it showed me that the wallpaper was peeling, exposing wooden slats underneath where the drywall had also come away. There was a piece of furniture in the room. A small side table, except it wasn't pushed up against a wall. It stood like a lonely sentry in the center of the room with a bottle on it.

I walked to the bottle and picked it up. Inside, a strange, glittery, purple liquid swirled. Around the neck of the bottle was a length of twine with a card label attached. I turned the label over and read what was on it.

DRINK ME

It reminded me of the tea room in 1852, although this was much later than then. It was later than 2021 and probably 2058 when Hatter came through.

The swirling purple liquid mesmerized me. I uncorked it, and immediately, a delicious smell emanated from the bottle—a fruity, spicy

flavor. I brought the bottle to my lips.

Someone slapped it out of my hands. It smashed on the floor, creating a puddle of purple. I looked up.

“Hatter!”

“Don’t drink something that you don’t know what it is. Didn’t your mother ever tell you that?”

Relief flooded through me. I’d been so angry at him, but he’d followed me through the mirror. I couldn’t help myself. I stood up on my tiptoes and kissed him.

He pulled away almost immediately. Disappointment flooded me. Our lips had barely touched.

“Woah, there. Time for that later. We need to get out of here. I’m guessing this isn’t your time.”

I shook my head, unable to speak. He took my hand in his and pulled me back through the mirror.

“I think this is 1852 again,” he said. “Look.” He pointed out of the window, and sure enough, the croquet match was still going on.

“Why did you come for me?” I whispered, not caring what was going on outside the window. The only thing I cared about at that moment was in that room.

He held his hand to my face, his fingers brushing my cheek. I melted, leaning into his touch. I’d not known how much I craved it until it was happening.

“I couldn’t let you go alone. I made you a promise, and I broke it. I’ll never do that to you again.”

“So you’ll go through the mirror with me?”

He took his eyes away from me for a second and looked toward the mirror. Then he brought his gaze back to me. It felt like he was looking into my very soul. “I’d go anywhere with you.”

My breath hitched in my throat as the world stopped around me. This time when I leaned up to kiss him, he met me in the middle.

His kiss was everything I thought it would be and more. My world turned on its axis as his lips moved against mine and his hand wrapped around my waist, the other still on my cheek. His lips were softer than I'd imagined, but they were no less addictive. I couldn't get enough of him. The way he tasted, the way his hair brushed against my neck. He matched my urgency as we lost ourselves in the moment and each other. I'd waited a lifetime for a kiss like this, and it didn't disappoint. If this was kissing the devil, I'd take it any day of the week.

A sound made him pull away. Someone was coming up the stairs.

"Let's get out of here," he said, pulling me toward the mirror. This time when we went through, we did it together hand in hand.

The room we entered was exactly the same as it had been when we left it, except the sound of footsteps was gone. A quick look out the window to the empty gardens was enough to tell me that we had definitely time-traveled but to when?

Hatter and I looked at each other.

"What now?"

“I don’t like this,” Hatter said. “Something is off. Don’t you feel it?”

I was still reeling from the best kiss I’d ever had. Everything felt off-kilter but in a good way. My senses were still tingling, and my body hadn’t righted itself yet.

“Maybe we should go and see where we are? Maybe we are in a time near to our own?” If I couldn’t have 2021, I’d take 2020 or 2022 if that was possible after the smashed mirror. Anything to get back to my mother.

“Ok,” Hatter conceded, “But the first time I see something strange, we are coming back here and going back through the mirror.”

I didn’t want to ask what, to his mind, constituted strange.

“Deal.”

He kept my hand in his as we slowly walked through the house and then down to the main floor.

I’d not paid much attention to what it looked like in 1852. I’d been too busy either trying to get to the mirror or escaping out of it when I first arrived.

It looked like I remembered it. No electricity, I saw. Dismay flooded through me.

“This isn’t the right time,” I said, pointing to the candle holders on the wall. “Maybe we should go back. No point checking this place out more.”

“Strangers!” a voice bellowed, echoing up the corridor. “Strangers in the house! Off with their heads!”

Hatter’s grip strengthened on my hand, but it was too late. Men with red hearts embroidered on their top pockets came out of nowhere and tore us apart.

“Let us go!” I yelled, kicking out at the man holding me. Mrs. Heart appeared. She looked strange in a black and red dress with a golden crown on her head and bright red painted lips.

“What do you want us to do with them?” The man holding me asked.

Mrs. Heart looked Hatter up and down before turning her beady eyes to me.

Anger surged through me as she appraised me.

“Throw them in different rooms and make sure the doors are locked. I have some ideas about what I’d like to do with them, but I’d like to think on it first.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Hatter fought against his captors as I was dragged away from him. Where I had only one man holding me, he had three.

I was taken to a small room on the main floor. Just as Mrs. Heart had asked, the door was closed behind me, and a second later, I heard a key turn in the lock.

The room was nothing special. It was decorated in the same style as the rest of the house, with flowery wallpaper and no furniture, but the window had metal bars on the other side. I’d not seen bars on the windows in 1852, nor in 2021, but whatever time this was, they were here now.

Guilt gnawed at me. Hatter had told me that weird things could happen if I went through the mirror, but I hadn’t listened.

What was worse, I'd made him come through with me. Sure it had been his choice to follow me, but if I hadn't gone through in the first place, he'd have no reason to come through.

I kicked out at the door in anger, but unlike the one earlier, this one remained steadfast.

I sat on the floor and waited. For what I didn't know, but there was nothing else for me to do. I was trapped, and there was no way I could see to get out. A couple of hours later, I heard a key in the lock. Two guards came in.

"Come with us."

I folded my arms. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me where my friend is."

They obviously didn't care for my attitude because they grabbed an arm each and marched me out of the room.

I was hauled into a room where Mrs. Heart sat at a mirror. A young woman dressed in a maid's uniform stopped smoothing out a bedspread to watch.

"There you are," Mrs. Heart said, with a smile. "Come here, child. I need my hair braided."

I gawked at her, unsure if I'd heard her correctly.

"You heard her," one of the guards said, pushing me into the room.

"I'm not braiding your hair!" I exclaimed. "Tell me where my friend is."

It felt weird calling him a friend after a kiss like the one we'd shared, but I wasn't in a position to unpick that thread right now.

"He's gone. Now come here and do my hair. I need to look perfect, and Lucy here is useless at that sort of thing."

The maid grimaced but didn't speak.

"No!"

Mrs. Heart finally tore her eyes away from her reflection. "You have two choices, my girl. Either be my second maid and do my hair or get

thrown into the cellar where you'll stay."

I weighed my options, both of which were awful. If I did as she asked, I might be able to find out what she'd done with Hatter.

I walked over to her and picked up a brush from her dressing table. As I brushed and braided her hair, I plotted my way out of this mess.

Mrs. Heart jabbered away, but I was barely listening. I didn't care why she thought she needed to be beautiful, nor what event she was planning.

I'd almost managed to get through the whole braiding ordeal when a word caught my attention.

"Sorry, what?" I said.

Mrs. Heart sighed in exasperation. "I said, I remember when the Dragon King's father came down to pick a bride. I was too young then, of course, but I think I've got a chance with this one."

"Dragon King?" What the fuck was happening?

"Haven't you been listening, girl?" Mrs. Heart snapped. "I need to be at my best. This year is my year. I can feel it."

She gave a quick appraisal of her hair and then stood.

"Come along now. I don't want to be late. You come too, Lucy."

The maid scampered over to us.

We had a guard with us as we walked through the house and out into the garden. An ornate black carriage sat on the driveway with six black horses tethered to it, each with a red feather plume in its hair. Behind it were six more carriages, which were being loaded with chests and boxes.

I was instructed to sit in the front carriage next to Lucy. Mrs. Heart stepped up after us, and the carriage set off.

"I'm so excited," Mrs. Heart said, positively radiating glee. "I wasn't sure this would happen again in my lifetime. And with me still being so young and beautiful."

I snorted at this. Mrs. Heart was many things, but young and beautiful weren't two of them. She was fifty if she was a day and had a face like a

bulldog wearing lipstick.

Lucy gave me a dig in the ribs, and I managed to turn the snort into a cough at the last minute.

Mrs. Heart glared at me for a second, then thought better of saying anything.

We didn't travel far. Not as far as Mimsey-on-Liddell anyway. We came to a stop in a field filled with hundreds of pretty striped tents.

"Is this some kind of country festival?" I asked Lucy when Mrs. Heart had stepped down from the carriage.

Lucy shook her head, her blonde curls almost escaping from her maid's hat.

"The Dragon King is coming to pick a bride. It's a very special occasion. Women from all over the land have come to see if they get picked."

"But Dragon King. What is that? Some kind of euphemism?"

Lucy's eyes softened, and she adopted a dreamy look. "No, he's the king of the dragons. The actual dragons. He's a dragon shifter, and legend has it, he's very sexy."

My mouth dropped open. Everyone around here was completely and totally mad.

Insanity aside, the festival, or whatever it was, was actually quite pleasant. Hundreds of people strolled around, drinking beer from tents that sold the stuff, eating food, and chatting animatedly between themselves. It reminded me of the renaissance fairs some of my online friends in the US sometimes attended, except everyone was wearing Victorian clothing.

Mrs. Heart had wandered off somewhere with her guards, so I was left to walk around with Lucy.

She seemed nice enough, but she bought into the whole dragon thing, which had me on edge. There was a definite dragon theme to the festivities. I saw them painted everywhere, and some people had come dressed with dragon wings. Some of the tents were shops, many of which sold dragon-themed items such as statues and jewelry.

I dragged my mind back to my history lessons at school, trying to think of something in England's history that would explain this weird festival, but nothing came to mind. The Welsh flag had a dragon on, but we were over a hundred miles from the Welsh border. Plus I had no idea why the Welsh flag had a dragon on it any more than I knew what this festival was all about.

"Mrs. Heart will probably win on account of her riches," Lucy sighed.

“Win what?” I asked absent-mindedly. I’d been looking for any sight of Hatter, but so far, I was coming up empty.”

“You know... the Dragon King’s heart.”

“Oh, that,” I replied, pretending to buy into the crazy.

“They say that whoever he marries will live in luxury her entire life.”

I stopped. “You really mean to tell me that some bloke is coming here, and the women are in some kind of competition to marry him.”

“Isn’t it exciting?” Lucy squealed.

“Why would anyone want to marry someone they’ve never met?” I replied, appalled by the whole thing. “And why suffer the ignominy of a competition to do it?”

Lucy looked at me as though I was the crazy one. “He’s supposed to be very handsome and rich.”

“But it’s so degrading,” I complained.

“It’s romantic, is what it is. I only wish I could enter.”

I shook my head and refrained from slapping some sense into the girl. I supposed that in the 1850s, there wasn’t much for a girl of no money to do. But to swoon over some hot guy they’d never met was the pits. Mind you, working for Mrs. Heart would have me wanting to be whisked off to imaginary realms too. A thought of Hatter came unbidden into my mind.

That’s different! I told myself. I wasn’t under the illusion that Hatter was a mythical creature, nor had he whisked me away. If anything, I had been doing the whisking.

“I’m an orphan,” Lucy said, taking my mind away from Hatter. “I’ve been working for Mrs. Heart since I was a small girl. I hate her. I hate everything about her, and I hate the job. That’s why I want to enter.”

“So enter.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I can’t enter. I have no money.”

“There’s an entry fee?” Now I understood. This whole thing was a scam to take money from wealthy ladies with the promise of some hunk taking

them away from their mundane lives.

“No, nothing like that, but it’s expected that only ladies of a certain standing enter. The Dragon King won’t pick someone as dowdy as me.”

I stared at her. Yes, she wore a dull maid’s uniform with no makeup and hair mostly hidden, but she was beautiful. She had the type of natural beauty that Mrs. Heart could never hope to have.

“You have to enter. Who cares that you have no money?”

“It’s not that easy. If Mrs. Heart found out, she’d punish me. She’d be livid if she thought one of her staff had entered.”

I sighed at the unfairness of it all. Heart was a bully in 1852, and she was a bully in whatever year this was. Not that much time had elapsed between the years. She looked pretty much the same as I remembered her.

“Come on then,” I said, linking arms with Lucy. “I see a tent selling wine, and I’ve suddenly developed a thirst.”

A glass of wine was thrust into our hands. It seemed that alcohol was free at this party, which was just as well, seeing as I had no money. “Now this is my kind of party,” I said, taking a sip of the red wine.

The tent was beginning to fill up. Both men and women filled the space, although I noticed the women had all gone overboard in their clothing choices. Maybe they were all in the running for their stupid competition.

The buzz of conversation suddenly increased, causing me to look up. The flap to the tent was open, enabling me to see the grounds outside. Up in the air, a spark of fire lit up the sky. I blinked and then nearly choked on my wine.

It was a dragon...An actual, real, fire-breathing dragon. No, dragons, plural. There were a few of them pulling an open carriage. And on the carriage stood the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen in my life.

“Oh shit!” I was really deep into the insanity now.

I'd been dragged to a huge stage by Lucy, and I wasn't sure what to do with myself. There was a sexy dragon-man on stage, and there were two dragons chomping on grass next to it. Like all of this was totally normal.

Two dragons. Two actual, real-life dragons.

Nothing in my life made sense. I wondered if I had actually drunk that weird swirling liquid when I went back through the mirror the first time, and it had sent me into some weird hallucination. But then, I remembered my life had been pretty weird before that point.

I'd time traveled. What were a couple of fire-breathing dragons between friends?

Lucy, for her part, was practically frothing at the mouth with excitement. She wasn't the only one, either. Hundreds of women jumped up and down and whispered in hushed excitement to each other. If this was 2021, they'd be throwing their panties at him by now. Mrs. Heart had suddenly appeared and managed to push her way to the front of the crowd.

A golden bowl was brought out onto the stage. I was a little more than surprised to see Dormus carrying it. He looked just like he had the last time I'd seen him, but this time, he was awake. Not a yawn in sight.

“The bowl has the entries in it,” Lucy squealed beside me. For someone who wasn’t allowed to enter, she was extremely giddy.

Dormus took to the center of the stage.

“And the first lady to come to the stage is... Olivia Smith.”

A young girl dressed up to the nines walked on stage. Half the crowd applauded, while the other half booed. Jealousy much?

“Does she win?” I asked as she glided across the stage. The Dragon King took her hand and kissed it. The poor girl nearly fainted in excitement. Or lack of oxygen. It was hard to tell in these corsets we were all expected to wear.

“No,” whispered Lucy in hushed tones. “She gets a couple of minutes to make an impression on the king. In the end, he gets to choose who he marries.”

“So everyone that enters gets time on the stage?”

Lucy nodded.

Well, this was going to be interesting.

I watched as woman after woman paraded themselves on stage, each more obnoxious than the last. Some were pretty, some funny or interesting, but all of them were simpering idiots with too much make-up on.

The whole thing was tragic, and yet, I was so entertained by the whole thing. It was like a car crash that you couldn’t take your eyes off of as you drove past. Lucy was enjoying it more than me. She booed like the best of them, only beaten in volume by Mrs. Heart.

The girls didn’t interest me, but the king himself did. Not because I thought he was sexy (Though he really was with long golden hair and no shirt on, he was smoking!) but because he couldn’t be more bored with the proceedings. Not a single girl had sparked his interest. Oh, he was polite and courteous to all of them, asking the right questions, and he didn’t overly yawn like Dormus had a tendency to do, but there was no light in his eyes.

I watched him more closely when Mrs. Heart was called to the stage. To give her, her due, she was the first to really open the Dragon King's eyes, but maybe that was because she was so different from the other girls. She was old enough to be most of their mother's for a start. Plus, she sauntered on stage so sure of herself, her crown sitting jauntily on the braids I'd done earlier. It must have taken some balls to wear a crown before the king had even decided.

I watched in fascination as she talked about all her riches and what she could give to him. He seemed more interested in her than he'd been in anyone else, but the more she waffled on about how amazing she was, the more bored he began to look.

"She should learn when to stop," I whispered at Lucy, who grinned at me. I looked over at the bowl. The scraps of paper were almost done. Soon this would all be over, and I could get out of here and go and look for Hatter.

"Thank you," Dormus said, ushering Mrs. Heart off the stage. I grinned at the look of annoyance on her face as she was practically manhandled down the steps.

Dormus collected the bowl and drew another name.

"Ms. Alice Tenniel. Please come to the stage."

I turned to Lucy, my heart almost stopping in shock. "What did you do?"

She grinned. I thought about what you said and decided to enter. I put your name in too when you weren't looking while we were in the wine tent.

I murmured a curse under my breath as the booing started again.

I was about to go on stage in front of hundreds of people to meet a king I had no intention of marrying, and I had nothing prepared.

My nerves rocketed as I took to the stage. The boos increased, setting my pulse racing. I didn't want to be here. I didn't even believe dragons existed, let alone dragon shifters. I was still under the impression that I'd somehow slipped into a weird coma or something.

The king smiled at me as he had every other woman that had taken to the stage before me—practiced, precise, thoroughly bored. I held out my hand, waiting for him to take it. He'd kissed the hand of every woman that had so far taken the stage. I was not prepared to let him kiss mine. As he took my hand, I shook it forcefully. His eyes lit up as he tried to understand what was happening. I'd shaken his hand like a man. He'd not been expecting it. Then he really looked at me. He knitted his brows as though he knew me from somewhere.

"Tell me about yourself, Ms. Tenniel," he said, his eyes suddenly bright with interest.

Well, I wasn't going to give him what he wanted. Sexy or not, I wasn't interested in him that way.

"I'm Alice. I work as a cowherd breeding them with sheep and horses to make my own unique creatures. My plan is to create an army of

sheepcowhorse hybrids to take over the world. In my spare time, I like to juggle walnuts and watermelons, and my favorite color is black.”

He stared at me, surprise filling his face. He wasn’t expecting me to say something so off the wall. Neither had I, to be honest, but I was sick of the whole thing and wanted to have a little fun.

The crowd fell silent. One second ticked by, two..three. And then he threw his head back and brayed with laughter. Seconds later, the crowd joined in.

I looked down in the crowd and saw Lucy giving me a thumbs up, a wide grin on her face. Next to her, Mrs. Heart glowered at me. Served her right for kidnapping my boyfriend...friend...whatever he was. From my position on the stage, I could see that there was only one piece of paper left in the golden bowl. If Lucy was telling the truth, her name would be pulled next. After another few minutes of ridiculousness, I pulled the king down to my level. As I did, I saw his guards take a step forward, but he waved them off.

“The next girl is the one you should pick,” I whispered in his ear. I had no interest in him. Actually, that wasn’t true. I was very much interested in him. There was something about him that seemed familiar to me, but there was only one man I wanted, and the Dragon King wasn’t him. He turned his head quickly and kissed my cheek. I was the only girl he’d kissed. It wasn’t sexy, more brotherly than anything else, but it did make me wonder if I’d played my hand too strongly. My nerves came crashing back to me as I stepped down from the stage.

I’d been right as Lucy took to the stage next. She was the worst dressed out of every girl that had gone up there, but she handled herself magnificently. The Dragon King seemed in a much more jovial mood, and I noticed he talked to her longer than anyone, even me.

He didn’t kiss her cheek as he had done me, but his eyes followed her as she walked down off the stage. I hugged her when she got to me.

Dormus, once again, took to the stage.

“Now that the King has met every entrant, I’d like to invite them all back on stage for the gift-giving.”

“Gift-giving?”

Lucy turned gray. “All the women have to give him something. I’d forgotten. I don’t have anything to give him.”

I shrugged. “Neither do I.”

We traipsed back on stage and lined up. Next to me stood Lucy and on the other side of her was Mrs. Heart. No doubt she’d placed herself at the end of the line so she could be the last to give him gifts. I thought about the long line of carriages that had followed us from Heart House, all filled with treasures, no doubt.

As the king moved along the line, I wracked my brains as to what I could give him. I had nothing on me. My silly spiel earlier had made him laugh, but I imagined that a lack of a gift would come across as rude. Especially since the other women were giving him all kinds of things. Gold jewelry, fine clothes, furs. I couldn’t compete. Then I remembered the small broach with my name on it that my mother had given me for my birthday as a joke. It wasn’t silver, but it was silver in color, and it was all I had. When he got to me, I handed over the broach almost apologetically. “So, you remember my name,” I said.

He rubbed his thumb over the broach. “I hadn’t forgotten your name, Alice.”

A shiver ran down my spine as he said my name with such familiarity. It was like he already knew me.

He moved on to Lucy, who recited a poem for him.

*’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,*

And the mome raths outgrabe.

IT WAS COMPLETELY NONSENSICAL, but she said it with such passion that the king was enraptured.

I SAW something in his eyes as he watched Lucy speak that I recognized. It was the same look that Hatter gave me. Not even the reciting of a weird poem was putting him off. She finished the last verse by repeating the first. The king asked her what it was.

“It’s called *The Jaberwocky*,” she replied, dropping into a curtsy. “I made it up myself.”

“Well, it was delightful. Thank you.”

It seemed the Dragon King wasn’t so formidable after all. He liked whimsy and fun.

He’d enjoyed my silly ramblings, and he’d enjoyed Lucy’s ridiculous poem.

Mrs. Heart grinned maliciously at us as the king moved on to her.

“Sorry that you’ve come all this way to listen to such nonsense,” she simpered, shooting Lucy an evil glare. “I hope my gifts will live up to your expectations.”

She waved her hand, and her guards came onto the stage. One by one, they dropped gift after gift at the king’s feet. Mrs. Heart looked so smug as the pile of gifts got higher and higher.

“This is very generous,” the king said as the final guard left the stage.

“That’s not all!” she grinned, clapping her hands together in delight. “I also have a carriage full of slaves for you.” She pointed to the side of the stage where an open carriage stood, filled with men and women in chains.

My mouth fell open as I recognized one of them.

“Hatter!” I whispered under my breath. Mrs. Heart was giving him to the Dragon King!

I paced up and down in front of one of the tents, biting my fingernails as people spent the evening enjoying themselves on the inside. The whole field of tents was full of the excited chatter of people. It seemed that marrying this dragon guy wasn't only a boon for the woman he picked, but it was also a big deal for her family and the village she came from. Something to do with unending riches. Like everything else, it was all about the money. The whole thing was insane. Mrs. Heart had given him more riches that anyone could hope to have in a lifetime, and if she married him, she'd end up with even more. Despite Lucy fantasizing romance into it, it was nothing more than a transactional event. I wouldn't have minded, in fact, I'd actually been enjoying the whole spectacle until the Dragon King took all his riches, including his carriage of slaves back to the dragon realm with him.

Lucy had told me this was all part of the event. The women got a night off to say goodbye to their families, even though he would only choose one of them, and he went back to wherever he had come from to make a decision.

Lucy had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the Dragon King and the whole competition, but when I asked her exactly where the dragon realm was, she drew a blank. The whole thing mystified me as to why

anyone would want to go and live somewhere that they didn't even know where it was, but hundreds of women had signed up for it. Unfortunately, it meant I had no clue where to start looking for Hatter. He'd been flown away on a carriage pulled by dragons. Up in the air was the best I could come up with for a location. All I could do was wait for the Dragon King to come back and stay long enough for me to grab five minutes with him.

"Are you alright?" Lucy asked, passing me a glass of wine from the tent.

I shook my head. "Not really. I need some air. All this noise is giving me a headache."

She linked arms with me, and together, we ambled to the edge of the field. In the distance, I could make out Heart House silhouetted against the moonlight. My way home was in there, but I didn't want to go through the mirror anymore. Not without Hatter.

"You upset about Heart's slaves?"

"One of them is my boyfriend. Or at least, I think he is."

She nodded, apparently deep in thought. "You really don't want to marry the Dragon King, do you? I thought you were just pretending to seem cool about the whole thing."

I almost laughed. "I really don't. The whole thing is absurd to me. I just want to go home, but the more I try, the farther away I get."

"I know what you mean. I'm an orphan. I can barely remember my home, but I know I'd love to go back there. Not that my home really exists anymore. I've spent more of my life at Heart House than I ever did at my own home."

"I'm sorry." And I genuinely was. However bad I had it, she had it worse. I'd never met my own father, but I had my mother. She was all the family I needed.

"It's fine. I came to terms with it long ago, but I don't want to stay there. I can't stay there."

“Is there anywhere else you can go? Another job, perhaps?”

She shrugged. “Perhaps, but Heart doesn’t pay me. I work for board and food. I have no money to pay for a carriage to leave the village.”

I was appalled by her admission. Mrs. Heart ran her entire empire on slaves, it seemed, because that’s exactly what Lucy was.

“I can’t get a job in the village because she pretty much owns it. She owns everything as far as the eye can see, these fields, the village.”

My heart ached for her, but there was nothing I could do. I had no money to give her. I’d been living on the generosity of Albus and Mrs. White for the past week.

“If I find Hatter, you can come with us.”

I don’t know why I said it. My mother was hardly rich. Most of the time, she struggled to feed the two of us, and I was due to start college, which meant any job I could get would be part-time around my studies and therefore not much in the way of money.

She pulled me into a hug. “Thank you for such a fine offer, but I’m planning to become the queen of dragons.”

I gave her a grin. “Yes, you are!”

As though we’d called the dragons by talking about them, one appeared in the evening sky. It flew around the festival site a couple of times before coming to a rest next to us.

I watched as he changed from a dragon into a beautiful man, complete with dragon wings.

“He’s just like a real-life Transformer,” I whispered, completely in awe of his transfiguration. I’d never seen anything like it before in my life.

“A what?” Lucy asked, gripping my arm.

I didn’t have time to answer her because the man-dragon spoke. “His Majesty requests your presence at his home.”

Was he talking to me? Yes, he was.

Beside me, Lucy squealed with excitement. “This is unheard of!”

“Just a minute,” I said to the dragon-man before pulling Lucy to one side.

“I can’t go with him. I don’t even know where the king lives.”

She jumped up and down on the spot. “You have to go. He must like you. Really like you. Oh, you are going to be the queen.”

I glanced over at the dragon, who waited patiently for my answer.

“I don’t want to be queen,” I replied in hushed tones. “I want you to be queen.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Well, obviously, so do I, but if I have to lose to anyone, I’d rather it be to you than Mrs. Heart.”

I had a feeling that Mrs. Heart was never in the running despite her gifts to the king. I really didn’t want to marry some king, and I didn’t want to fly even further from the mirror, but wherever the king was, Hatter was too.

“Okay,” I said to the dragon man. “I’ll come on one condition. That my friend here can come too.”

He nodded his head. “So be it. You shall travel on my back.”

I watched in fascination as he transformed back into his full dragon form.

“This is literally the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me,” enthused Lucy, and I hoisted her onto the dragon’s back. She grabbed the reins around his neck and waited for me to hop up behind her. I was almost up when a bloodcurdling scream pierced the night.

“Cheaters!” Mrs. Heart yelled, pointing to us from a nearby tent. “Somebody stop them. They are trying to cheat!”

The dragon began his transformation back into a man causing Lucy and me to fall backward onto the dirt. Two of Heart’s guards grabbed us, and before we could fight back, we were hauled into the back of a carriage. Just before the door closed, I saw scores of people coming out of the tents to see what the kerfuffle was about.

We didn't travel far, so I wasn't surprised to see we were back at the Heart House when the doors opened.

Mrs. Heart stood on the driveway, her mouth set into a grimace. "You two have humiliated the future Queen of Dragons," she shrieked. "In front of one of my husband-to-be's servants, no less."

"He invited us to meet with the king," I shot back but was rewarded with a slap in the face.

"Don't you dare talk to me. The pair of you will be taken to the cellar. I don't wish to hear a peep out of either of you."

As we were dragged away by her guards, she shouted after us. "And don't think you will be getting out tomorrow. Neither of you will see daylight, ever again!"

Lucy sat in the corner, her head in her hands. I couldn't tell if she was crying or not, but I got the feeling this wasn't her first time down here.

The cellar was just that, a place to store things below the main house. It wasn't the dungeon I thought it would be. Along the back wall, hundreds of bottles of wine sat, gathering dust. Boxes were piled up neatly, each of which had a heart symbol branded into them.

"We can get out of this," I said confidently, checking the two small windows to see if they would open. Bars on the outside showed me that they weren't a valid escape route, but we might be able to shout out of them. Mrs. Heart might be our employer, but that didn't mean we were slaves to be done with as she willed. Even in this weird world I seemed to have fallen into, I doubted it was legal to hold people captive. Mind you, there was such a thing as a dragon shifter king, so what did I know?

"You won't find a way out," Lucy mumbled. "I've tried before. Usually, she gets bored and annoyed that she can't do her own hair, so she lets me out, but I don't think she will this time."

"Don't be so sure," I replied, grabbing a bottle of wine from the massive wine rack.

Lucy's lips curled up when she saw what I had in my hand.

“You going to drink yourself into oblivion?”

“Not exactly, although a taste might be nice. How much do you reckon this costs?”

I didn’t know much about wine, but I knew enough to understand that anyone who collected wine only collected the good stuff, and that meant expensive. I popped the cork, letting it fly across the room, and took a swig right from the bottle.

“Want to try?” I held out the bottle to Lucy. Shock turned to amusement as she took the bottle. “She’ll probably kill us both anyway. May as well be drunk on her wine as she does it. Soften the pain a bit.”

I grabbed another bottle as she drank the wine down. “Actually, I’m not planning to get drunk. You might want to hold back a bit too. I’ve got better plans for these.”

Lucy arched a brow. “Like what?”

I held the bottle toward her. “How much do you think this costs?” I’d picked one with a black label with gold writing. From my untrained eyes, it looked to be an expensive choice. Plus, it had a lot of dust, so it had been down here a long time.

Lucy shrugged. “A lot. What exactly are you planning to do with it, if not drink it?”

I walked slowly to the cellar stairs and made my way up. “I don’t think Mrs. Heart is going to be pleased to hear her precious wine collection being smashed to pieces, do you?”

Lucy’s eyes widened along with a grin. “You can’t!”

“Just watch me!”

I held the bottle over my head, ready to throw it to the floor. I had a feeling I’d have to smash quite a few bottles to get the attention of someone on the other side, but I was unsurprisingly ok with that.

The door opened seconds before I let go of the bottle. The shock of it almost had me falling back down the stairs. I hastily hid the bottle behind

my back as the guard that had brought us down here opened the door.

I rearranged my features into something that closely resembled innocence. “Yes? Can we help you?”

The guard eyed me curiously. “It turns out that Mrs. Heart isn’t actually allowed to keep you locked up after all. His highness, the Dragon King, wants to speak to you...both.” He looked down to where Lucy sat, her cheeks red after downing so much wine. At least, she’d had the forethought to hide her bottle too.

The two of us trooped out after the guard, who led us to the kitchen. “Wait here, the pair of you. Mrs. Heart wants to see you before you go.” He turned to the chef, a beefy man in his mid-fifties with a large white mustache and a white chef’s hat covering his bald head. “Watch them. I’ll be back in a minute.”

The chef pulled a face that was enough to tell me that he had no intention of watching us, not that it mattered. If we were going to see the Dragon King, I didn’t want to go anywhere else anyway.

All around us, the kitchen staff went about their business as though we weren’t there. When Mrs. Heart entered the room, the pace changed dramatically. Maids and kitchen hands either scurried away or began working twice as fast as they had before. There was an atmosphere of general terror among them.

She stopped short of us and looked the pair of us up and down as though we were vermin that had just crapped in her coffee.

“Strip!” she snarled.

“Excuse me?” She better be talking to the chef about strip steak because I wasn’t planning on stripping in this room full of people.

“You heard me,” she grimaced, pushing her meaty face into mine. “Take all your clothes off.”

I’m pretty sure my mouth was open so far that my chin was scraping the floor at this point. “Why?”

A guard held a sword out to my middle. “You don’t question Mrs. Heart. Do as she says.”

I had two choices, by the looks of it. Either do a weird striptease for the hired help or be skewered. Neither was appealing, but only one meant dying. I started to unbutton my dress.

As Lucy and I took our clothes off, I began to wonder if she was actually undressing us so she could have the chef cut us up and put our parts into the big pot he was stirring. I noticed that the kitchen staff had forgotten to be scared as curiosity took over. I guess it wasn’t a daily occurrence to have two women get naked in the kitchen.

“This is most unsanitary,” the chef grumbled as my dress fell to the floor.

The guard momentarily took his sword away from me and held it toward the chef. It was enough to shut him up. He turned back to his stew or whatever it was he was making. The base for human soup, probably.

One thing about dresses of this era was that there were a great many layers. I didn’t know the full names for them all, but it would be a while before the kitchen staff was going to see me in the buff.

Mrs. Heart tapped her feet impatiently as I struggled out of my clothes.

Eventually, Lucy and I were down to our petticoats. I’d have preferred a bra and panties, but I didn’t think the people in this day and age would cope with that. As it was, one of the kitchen boys was staring at us so hard that he was in danger of chopping his own fingers off rather than the carrots he was supposed to be chopping...and we were still fully covered. The petticoat was practically neck to floor. The poor guy was going to have a heart attack when I pulled that layer off. No underwear.

“Stop!” Mrs. Heart yelled so loudly the boy dropped his knife completely. It clattered to the floor with a loud clang.

She thrust two old burlap sacks with holes cut out for our heads and arms at us. “Wear these. I can’t stop His Highness from meeting with you

again, but I shall not let you dress for the occasion.”

So that’s why she wanted us to undress. Better than ending up as a dinner course. I was almost cheerful as I pulled the old sack over my head. I didn’t care what I wore to meet the Dragon King. As long as I found Hatter, it didn’t matter.

Lucy, on the other hand, looked decidedly sick as she looked down at her new burlap “dress.” Her petticoats fanned out from under it, giving her a decidedly weird shape.

“Come on, then. Don’t dilly dally. I promised I’d take the pair of you to the fair.”

We were frogmarched outside and to the carriage. I was glad it was summer. The old-fashioned dresses were awful to wear, but they kept me warm. The sack, less so. But if it meant I was free to try and find Hatter, I’d take it, cold-ass cheeks or not.

“I can’t believe she let us out!” Lucy exclaimed, glee evident in her voice.

“I wouldn’t look too happy about it,” I said, pointing to the other side of the huge marquee where Mrs. Heart was eyeing us beadily. “We are still prisoners, just prisoners with the illusion of freedom. I have a feeling that if we try and leave this tent, she’ll have her guards on us quicker than you can say G and T.”

“Gee and what?”

“Never mind.” We were in one of the tents serving alcohol. A large bar took up one long side of it, and the rest of the space was taken up with a number of tables and chairs. Mrs. Heart had taken up most of the space with her entourage, whereas we had found a table as far away from her as possible, but still within the tent. I cast my eyes over to the bar. They didn’t actually serve gin and tonics by the looks of it, but it wasn’t like Mrs. Heart would permit me to order one if they did. A beer or five would have worked just as well.

Everyone that bothered to look our way stuck their noses up at us and our burlap attire. I took to sticking up two fingers at them out of sheer spite.

The place was noisy, filled with people having a great time. And by people, I mean everyone but Lucy and me. The noise quickly died down

when one of the dragon shifters entered. Mrs. Heart stood up, knocking a whole table of beers over with her huge dress, just to be the first one to greet him. Lucy practically bounced in her chair as all eyes turned to the dragon-man. He wasn't even the king, just one of his lackeys, but he certainly commanded attention.

"Come on," I said, grabbing Lucy's hand. "Let's get out of here while Mrs. Heart is otherwise engaged."

Lucy was almost reluctant to leave, so spellbound was she with the dragon guy, that I practically had to pull her from the tent.

"He's just a man!" I reminded her as we headed out into the cool, summer breeze.

"He's a dragon!" She reminded me as though I'd forgotten.

"He's not *the* dragon, though, is he? He's just a servant with wings. If we're lucky, we might get to see the king himself. Didn't the guard say he wanted to meet with us? I'm betting Mrs. Heart was planning to be there when he did, so she could belittle us and make us look as crap as possible when he does."

"I can't look any worse than I already do!" Lucy complained, holding up her sack dress and the muddy hem of her petticoat.

I gave her a grin. "Let's take a look around. You never know, he might be into burlap."

As we wandered around the fields, looking at all the tents and the people, I kept an eye out for Hatter. Not that I expected to see him. He was now the Dragon King's slave and probably at wherever it was that the Dragon King lived.

Everybody was having so much fun. There were people on unicycles and jugglers and acrobats performing. It seemed that wherever I turned my eyes, there was some kind of entertainment going on.

"A guard!" Lucy hissed and dragged me into a tent. Almost as soon as I was in there, I began to cough. The air was thick with smoke.

“Whooooo are yooooo?”

I swiveled on my bare feet. I knew that voice. It was the guy from the cigar shop back in 1852. I squinted my eyes to try and get a better look through all the smoke. It was really him...except he had wings now. Not the same as the dragons, but prettier, softer, in much brighter colors. Of course, he did. Why wouldn't he? Perfectly normal, nothing to see here.

“Does that guy have wings, or am I inhaling too much opium?” I giggled. I was lightheaded already. How Sherlock Holmes did so much of the stuff was beyond me. “Oh, Sherlock was fictional!”

I started laughing. I couldn't help it. Whatever was in the air was potent stuff.

“I think we should leave,” Lucy cackled.

Once outside, Lucy and I ran around the tent and collapsed onto the grass in fits of giggles.

“Who's Sherlock?” Lucy asked.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. When was the first Sherlock Holmes written? I had no idea. It probably didn't exist in this weird timeline anyway. But dragon men and weird opium smoking winged creatures did. A weird opium-smoking, winged creature that also happened to exist in the last time I was in. Except there, he was human. No wings.

I wondered if there would be anyone else from that timeline here—Mrs. White...Albus...Kit?

I sat up, my head suddenly clear. “This is still 1852. It's just another dimension...another version of it like a parallel universe or something.”

“A palalalal what now?”

“Come on,” I said, pulling Lucy to her feet. “Let's go and find the Dragon King.” And Hatter, I added silently.

She sobered up at hearing the Dragon King mentioned.

We followed the sound of cheering people and came to a sideshow. Some performing mice dressed in miniature pink tutus did a performing

dance while people cheered. Back in my own time, I'd have thought that they were highly trained, but here, they were probably shifters or tiny humans in disguise or some other shit.

"I swear if one of them says 'Same thing we do every night Pinky, try to take over the world,' I'm gonna lose it."

Lucy eyed me curiously. "I think you need to take a few more deep breaths. That smoke stuff is still in your system."

Opium! I wanted to say but did what she said instead and inhaled deeply. The mice were ushered off the stage, and on came a white rabbit in a red waistcoat with a gold fob watch.

I inhaled again, but this time out of shock. It was Albus. Or at least, a rabbit version of him. "Are there such things as rabbit shifters in this world?" I asked as the rabbit Albus scurried around the small stage, much to the amusement of the crowd. Every so often, it would stop and bring the watch out of its small pocket and look at it before scurrying around again.

"Don't be silly. Whoever heard of a rabbit shifter?"

"Yeah, I'm the silly one," I replied sarcastically. Dragon shifters were perfectly normal, but rabbit shifters were silly. Got it.

After the rabbit came a cat. A cat with pink and purple stripes and the largest grin I'd ever seen on an animal before. I didn't ask this time. I already knew it was Kit. It looked just like him.

I didn't want to see any more. It was weird. Everything was weird. Too weird. I needed to get out of this place and back to my own world where people weren't cats and rabbits and winged cigar sellers. Where Dragons didn't exist and where I wouldn't have to wear the latest sack fashion.

I turned quickly, ready to head away from the animal show, only to bump right into Mrs. Heart.

"I've been looking for you two reprobates all over. How dare you wander off when I expressly forbade you to leave my sight!"

I was in no mood for her. None at all. I'd dealt with enough shit that I didn't have the mental capacity to deal with her as well.

"Why don't you go fu..."

"Your Highness!" Beside me, Lucy curtsied, pulling on my sack, to bring me into a curtsy also.

Mrs. Heart's face was a picture. It turned from a snarl to a smile the second she realized we weren't joking with her and The Dragon King really was beside her.

"Your Highness," she said, bobbing into a curtsy herself. "I was just saying to one of your men that I'd love the pleasure of your company again. I have a table reserved in the Grand Marquee if you'd care to join me."

He gave her a curt nod. "Thank you, Mrs. Heart. That's very generous, but I was here to invite the lovely Ms. Tenniel to my home."

I'd never seen a person's face fall so quickly as that of Mrs. Heart's. She recovered quickly, but I saw the look of disgust.

It gave me lots of warm fuzzies. Much better than telling her where she could go stick it. The king himself had practically done that for me.

Mrs. Heart grabbed me into a hug, almost squashing my face against her huge bosom. "Of course. She's such a young girl; I'll have to be her chaperone. I can't let her just go off with a man she barely knows, even if he is the king. You understand, of course."

"I assure you she will come to no harm, but I understand your concern. He turned his eyes to Lucy. "I wonder if Lucy would like to chaperone us? See that I don't get up to no good."

"No...she's not properly qualified..."

I almost laughed as Mrs. Heart began to bluster. The king put his hand on her arm, causing her to let me out of her death grip. "I wouldn't think of taking you away from all this. After all, you planned it. It would be unfair of me to deprive you of it."

She was still blustering as the king hooked his arms so Lucy and I could take one side each.

I don't like to think of myself as a petty person, but I might have turned and stuck my tongue out at Mrs. Heart as we walked away from her.

The king took my hand and helped me into his carriage. His eyes twinkled with fire as I took a seat. A shiver ran down my spine. There was something about him. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Of course, it could be just the fact he was a freaking dragon. Lucy, for her part, stepped up to the carriage like a lady. Even in a burlap sack, she exuded grace. She was born to be more than a slave to Mrs. Heart. She was slow and measured in the way she sat, and it was only later. I realized it was because she was drawing out the time that she held the Dragon King's hand. Whereas I'd practically jumped in, she turned it into almost a dance.

She had it bad for him. Not that I had time to worry, his dragons had already begun to pull us, and it wasn't long before we were airborne.

Mrs. Heart and the field full of tents soon became a distant blur as we soared through the air to the Dragon King's home

If I hadn't traveled through time, seen a man with wings and a rabbit that looked just like a person, I'd have thought I was crazy when we pulled up to the Dragon King's home.

For a start, it was nowhere in England. Nor Scotland or Wales. It was more like the Himalayas than anywhere I recognized, but we'd not traveled that far. Nor was it particularly cold, despite being on the very peak of a mountain. To say the views were incredible didn't do the place any justice. The surrounding mountains were all red, giving the impression they were on fire.

Maybe we were in hell? Except, a breathtaking version of it.

"The mountains aren't really red," the Dragon King whispered into my ear, almost making me fall out of the carriage. "It's a certain type of flower that grows here where the air is thin. Most of the year, the mountains are green or grey, but in the summer, we're all treated to this dazzling display."

"Lovely," I murmured. His breath on my cheek was making me forget how to speak coherently.

"It's stunning," Lucy said with more aplomb than I'd managed. "Truly a spectacle. You and your people are very lucky."

He took her hand and helped her out of the carriage. She positively beamed at him.

“I’m the lucky one to have you two beautiful ladies here with me.”

While I rolled my eyes at such a corny line, Lucy blushed the color of the flowers surrounding us.

The village was made up of a variety of platforms built into the mountain, but most of the houses seemed to have been built right into the mountain itself.

Lucy and I followed the King into what I thought was a house but turned out to be a huge cavern. The peak of the mountain was completely hollow. A long table stretched the length of the room, with chairs on either side. I counted at least twenty before we were ushered through a magnificent gold door.

“This is my private chambers,” the king said, leading us along a corridor. Windowless holes dotted the corridor giving it light. The floor was not roughly hewn out of the rock of the mountain as I’d expected. It was made of polished white marble. Opposite every window stood a golden urn filled with beautiful arrangements of flowers, and between these hung paintings of what I assumed to be the dragon royal family.

It was exactly what I thought a palace should look like except for the mountain view, which seemed at odds with the stunning decor. I’d once taken a tour of Buckingham palace with my mother. She’d spent the whole tour enthusing about the artwork and the furniture, while I’d spent it wondering if the queen crapped on a gold toilet. In my defense, I was seven years old at the time.

Thinking about my mother brought a pang to my heart.

She’d have loved this place.

“If this corridor brings us to some weird room where we’ll end up being the king’s slaves, I’m not going to be happy!” I whispered to Lucy. She blushed again, but I notice she didn’t say that she shared my feelings.

The corridor came to an end, and I found myself in a bright and airy room with another table. This one, much smaller. The white marble theme

carried on in here with white floors and painted white walls.

“You two make yourself at home. I’ll see to arrangements for us some dinner. We can get acquainted then.”

“Lovely,” I replied for the second time since coming to the mountain top. Good to see my brain power was still intact.

“It’s truly an honor to be here. Thank you so much for inviting us.” Lucy to the rescue again. I saw how nervous she was around him, but years of being nervous around Mrs. Heart had taught her to keep calm anyway. She was pretty amazing. If I had a crush on the king as big as she did, I’d be a bumbling mess. Well, more of a bumbling mess than I already seemed to be.

The king clapped his hands, and a fire came to life in a fireplace I’d not noticed before.

“It can get a little chilly up here. Please make yourself at home. I’ll be back shortly.”

“The guy is going to kill us and eat us for dinner!” I said, once he’d left through one of the three doors that exited the room.

Lucy laughed. “Didn’t you think that Mrs. Heart was going to have the chef put us in her stew earlier?”

Damn. I’d forgotten I’d told her that particular theory.

“He’s a gentleman. He just wants to have dinner *with* us.” She emphasized the word with. I wasn’t so sure.

“This is different. He’s a dragon! This find-a-bride scheme he has got going on. How do we know he doesn’t do this all over the place and take women back here and...”

“Eat them? Make them slaves? You have an overactive imagination.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said, checking the door opposite to the one he’d left by. I still wasn’t convinced that any of this was real and I wasn’t dreaming the whole thing. It would certainly explain a lot. “I’m going to go and find Hatter. You coming?”

She looked appalled that I would wander around the king's palace unaccompanied. "No, we can't."

"Fine," I said, not wanting to get into an argument with her. "You stay here. I'll go and see what I can find. I'll be right back."

I slipped through the door, which led to an outdoor veranda. It was wide enough to fit a couple of tables and chairs. The tables even had their own umbrellas over them. The whole place reminded me of a posh holiday resort in the alps. Not that I'd ever been to a posh holiday resort in the alps, but I had seen some pictures of one on Pinterest once, which was as close as I'd ever get. There were no other doors leading from the veranda, but there was a set of steps. I raced down them and found a door to a lower level. Downstairs, it was decorated much more mundanely. There were no paintings of kings and queens gone by and no floral arrangements. It was just a drab corridor painted in pale grey with a number of doors leading off it. The first door turned out to be the palace kitchens. No one noticed as I stuck my head through, though I didn't linger. The other doors all seemed to be for the staff. If Hatter was anywhere, I'd find him here.

The last door brought me to a large room with long lines of sofas set out almost like an airport waiting room. People sat around chatting. Some read. Some played cards. If I wasn't mistaken, I'd have thought this was a break room for the staff. It was hardly the underground vault with cells that I imagined the Hatter would be kept in, but there he was. Nobody batted an eyelid as I walked in. He was sitting in a corner, nose deep in a newspaper.

"Who knew dragons could read, eh?" I said.

His black eyes widened, and he broke into a smile when he saw it was me.

"Alice!" He brought me into a hug. I closed my eyes, enjoying the feeling of him next to me, of his body up against mine. I nuzzled my face into his neck, wanting to stay in his arms forever. There was something

about him that made me feel at home, away from a wonderland of dragons and rabbits and pink and purple cats.

Outside, I must have looked so calm, and yet, like a swan with its legs pumping away under the water's surface, my calm exterior was only a facade. Inside, my heart pounded, and my body reacted to the way he held me, to his hands around me, to his familiar scent. My body was abuzz, and yet we were trapped here. He might not have been in chains or a cage, but he was a prisoner. There was no way off of this mountain without wings. I'd checked when we flew in.

"They have quite an interesting newspaper, it turns out," Hatter said, taking me away from my own thoughts of escape and the fact that if he lowered his hands a fraction, they'd be on my ass.

"What?" With great reluctance, I pulled away to hear him properly.

"The Dragon newspaper. You said something about dragons being able to read. Why are you wearing a sack that says Powell's Flour Company?"

I opened my mouth to explain when someone else beat me to it.

"Lucy told me that Mrs. Heart forced you to wear them. I've sorted out something a little more appropriate for you both."

I blushed bright red when I turned to see the king. I was giving Lucy a run for her money in the blushing stakes. Only I was blushing because I'd just been caught speaking to the slaves and not because I had the hots for the king. My hots were reserved for the man who currently had his body pressed up against my back, making it difficult to form a coherent thought.

"I was just er..."

"Lucy also told me that Mr. Hatter here is a friend of yours," continued the king. "I wonder, Mr. Hatter, would you join us for dinner?"

Crap. He was going to eat Hatter now too.

"Thank you. I'd be delighted."

The three of us headed back upstairs to the room with the fire where I'd left Lucy.

The whole way, I tried to come up with an escape plan just in case the king decided on an impromptu barbeque with his dragon friends. I was almost ready to pull Hatter over the side of the veranda wall and scale the mountain when the king opened the door to a massive spread of food.

“Woah,” I said as I stepped inside. The table was almost groaning under the sheer weight of food. And it smelled delicious. The spread would give Mrs. White a run for her money.

Lucy was already sitting at the table, waiting for us to join her.

“The king has graciously found us some clothes,” Lucy beamed, standing up as we entered.

“It’s a cold buffet,” the king said. “If you two ladies would like to go and get dressed, we can wait.”

I was more than happy to sit and eat wearing the sack. The food looked so delicious, and I was so hungry that going anywhere that involved moving away from the food was not an appealing thought.

Lucy, on the other hand, was desperate to get away. She ran across the room and took my hand in hers. “Want to get changed now or wait until after dinner?”

The way she looked at me left me in no doubt as to what her choice was.

“Let’s get changed,” I said, plastering a fake smile on my face.

Just what I needed. The hour or so it took to squeeze myself into another corset and the millions of layers women seemed to need to wear in 1852, or whatever year this was in this crazy place.

A maid ushered us from the room and to a place that would rival a Hollywood studio’s closet.

The room was bigger than my bedroom at home, with rows of suits along one side and regal wear on the other. A row of polished black shoes took up the back wall and in the center, a table with rows and rows of cufflinks.

“This is the King’s dressing room,” the maid announced, bustling us through it. “The queen’s dressing room is next door.”

“The queen?” I asked as she opened a door.

“The old queen, the current king’s mother, but it will be for the future queen when his majesty finds his bride. Of course, she will get to redecorate how she wishes and pick and choose which clothes she wishes to wear.”

I was listening, but only taking half of it in. It was hard to pay attention in a room filled with dresses and jewels.

Because that’s exactly what it was. It was three times the size of the king’s dressing room. Hundreds of gorgeous dresses hung on rails along both sides of the room.

A thousand pairs of shoes lined the other wall in a specially built shelving unit. The crowning glory, and I mean that literally, was the massive display of jewelry on velvet cushions in glass cases.

In the center, was a crown with a diamond the size of an egg in the front, surrounded by dazzling rubies

“The king tells me you can choose what you like. Just pick something, and I’ll help you into it.”

I wondered if I’d get away with asking for a sequined ballgown and a tiara dripping in diamonds but thought better of it when I saw a row of jeans.

“Jeans are a thing here?” I asked, picking a pair of black ones from a pile.

“We are a working community. The old queen likes to work with the people.”

I don’t even know why I was surprised. They had opium sellers with wings. Why not jeans? It was the most mundane of surprises in this place so far. I found a pile of black t-shirts to go with the jeans.

“The queen likes to work?” Lucy said, being much more perceptive than me. “She’s still alive?”

The maid nodded. "Very much so, but she moved out of the royal quarters when the old king died many years ago. She preferred a much more modest apartment. The same with her clothing and jewelry. This has been left to the new queen...whoever that will be."

Lucy practically bounced with excitement. Not that I could blame her. She'd only ever been wearing a maid's uniform and a sack since I'd met her. I doubted there would be much opportunity to wear anything nice working for Mrs. Heart. While I pulled on the jeans and t-shirt combo, Lucy went for a pretty summer dress. I could tell she was dying to wear some of the more opulent clothes, but maybe me dressing down had made her afraid to ask.

Both the hatter and the king stood when we came back into the room. Lucy and I took seats opposite each other with Hatter and the king between us on either side.

"I was just asking how Mr. Hatter knows you, Ms. Tenniel."

"Alice, please," I said, heaping my plate with food. "We just met, really."

"So I hear. Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

"There's nothing much to tell. I live with my mother. She likes fine art and furniture. She'd love this place." I gestured around with my fork. "Lucy, weren't you just telling me how much you admired the artwork?"

I kicked her under the table. We'd discussed no such thing, but I'd rather his attention was on her. I was hungry.

"That's right. It's exquisite. And your mother's dressing room. I admit to being a little intimidated by it."

The kings smiled. "It's only fabric and stones. Nothing to be intimidated by, but I must say you do look rather fetching in the dress you chose. My mother would be happy to see it worn again. It was one of her favorites."

Lucy beamed. "Will the queen be joining us?"

"The queen no longer likes the title. I just call her mother, and no. I'm afraid she won't. She's a busy woman."

I was more than happy to let the two chat, but the conversation soon came back around to me.

“Alice. Tell me about your mother. She sounds wonderful.”

I nodded, swallowing back my food and trying not to choke. “She is wonderful. She’s more than a mother; she’s my best friend too.”

“And your father?”

I shrugged. “Not in the picture. Never has been.”

The king lowered his eyes. “I’m sorry to hear that. A child should never have to be without a parent.”

“My mother made up for it. We didn’t have much, but she worked her ass...er I mean she worked hard to keep us in food and clothes. I don’t miss something I never had.”

The king nodded, but his face was troubled. Trust me to be a downer. I turned to Lucy and gestured for her to talk. Luckily, she understood what I was trying to get across and struck up a conversation with the king, leaving me free to eat my food.

After dinner, a string quartet was brought out.

“Care to dance?” I looked up to see the king holding his hand out to me.

“I think Lucy likes dancing,” I mumbled. “I have two left feet.”

“Nonsense. I bet you are a wonderful dancer.” He practically pulled me to my feet and brought me into a waltz.

“You two can partner up,” he shouted over to Hatter and Lucy. Neither looked particularly happy with the situation, but they joined us in the dancing.

Jealousy ripped through me as I looked at Lucy in Hatter’s arms, but the slightly green look on her face told me she felt the same way about me and the king dancing.

“You are a better dancer than you think,” the king said, spinning me around.

“I have a good lead,” I answered, wondering how long I should dance before making an excuse to sit down.

“Tell me more about your childhood. Were you happy?”

I spent the next half hour talking about my childhood and wondering what I’d done in life to end up dancing in the arms of a king...who was also a dragon.

The string quartet slowed the tempo. Slow dance time.

“I was wondering if you’d let me cut in?” Hatter said, saving me from dancing any closer to the king. It wasn’t that the king wasn’t good-looking. The guy was a model of male perfection, but he wasn’t Hatter.

“Of course. Then I shall dance with the lovely Lucy.”

I swear Lucy’s cheeks almost lit up the whole room as the king pulled her into his arms. She rested her head against his chest and closed her eyes. If heaven was a place, Lucy was surely there right now.

“Thanks,” I whispered to Hatter. “The guy kept asking me about my childhood and my mother.”

“No thanks required. I was doing it out of pure selfishness.”

He looked down at me in such a way that my whole body tingled. When he pulled me toward him. I let myself melt into his arms. One of his arms snaked around my waist, with the other holding my hand. I rested my head on his shoulder in much the same way I’d done downstairs when he hugged me, but this time, we were moving. Our bodies swayed in sync as the heat rose between us. I let him guide me, matching my body movements to his as the music took us both to somewhere sensual. Somewhere exotic and exciting. I breathed in deeply, inhaling the scent of him. Pure masculinity with a hint of hat glue I remembered from his shop. I tried not to think of his hot body and sexy tattoo under his top, but it was hard, considering it was pushed up against my chest. We were no longer just dancing. This was a prelude to something else. I brought my head up and gazed into his black eyes. I saw need in them. He felt the same way I did. I wanted more.

Wanted to dance like this in private, away from Lucy and the king. Away from prying eyes where I could pull his shirt over his head and see his tattoos again and feel his naked skin against mine.

He moved forward, bringing his lips to mine. I closed my eyes, reaching into the kiss just as the music stopped.

“Looks like our night is over,” the king boomed out. “Time for me to drop you lovely people home. Mr. Hatter, I assume you’d prefer to travel home with your friends?”

I opened my eyes in time to see Hatter nodding. The moment had gone.

“I’ve secured tents for you all. I trust you’ll all be comfortable for the night.”

He shook Hatter’s hand, then moved to Lucy.

“It was a great pleasure dancing with you this evening.”

“And you, sire. I hope to do it again sometime,” she said, dropping into a curtsy, probably to hide her blushing cheeks.

“Alice,” he said, moving to me. “I am so pleased to have met you. I can’t thank you enough for agreeing to come up to my home. I have a gift if you’ll permit me.”

He pulled a necklace from his pocket and placed it around my neck. The dragon pendant that hung on it was heavy around my neck. It felt like an obligation rather than a gift. He’d not given one to Lucy, only to me.

“Thank you,” I dropped into a curtsy and plastered a fake smile on my lips. I didn’t want to be the wife of a Dragon King. I wanted to go home.

Lucy and I were shown to a tent, while Hatter was shown to another nearby. I watched where he went, and as soon as the king and his entourage left, I turned to Lucy.

“You are going to be a queen!” she squealed, positively brimming with excitement. I had to admire her. She wanted to be picked by the Dragon King more than anything, but she still managed to be excited for me.

I pulled her into a hug. “You don’t know that yet. He still might choose you.” I felt her head shake. She’d already made up her mind that she’d lost, just as she had made up her mind that I’d won, and neither of us was particularly happy about it, despite her outward excitement. I needed to leave tonight. I didn’t want to be here when the king chose his bride. I didn’t want Lucy to be right.

“Listen, I’m going to spend the night in Hatter’s tent. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and left her before she tried to talk me out of it.

Hatter was in a small tent identical to the one offered to Lucy and me, but where ours had two beds, Hatter’s only had one.

He seemed surprised to see me when I walked in. He was sitting on the bed, his shirt already off. My breath hitched as I took in his beauty. There was something so beguiling about him, and him already on the bed was not helping me concentrate.

“I thought you’d want to be rested for tomorrow,” Hatter said when he saw me.

And just like that, the spell was broken.

“What are you talking about? I’m not staying. We need to leave tonight...now. You saw the necklace he gave me, right?” I held the large dragon pendant up for emphasis.

He came to me and put his hands on my shoulders, sadness deep in his eyes.

“We can’t leave, Alice. You might not have seen the guards around this part of the field, but there are many. Neither of us will get past them.”

Fear gripped me. “But we have to go. If I stay...”

“You’ll have to marry the Dragon King. I know.” He brought a hand up to my face. “I’m sorry. I never thought things would work out this way.”

“But what if we sneak out?”

He shook his head sadly. "I looked. It's the king's guard. We might be able to sneak past humans, but there is no way we'll get past dragons."

The full reality of my situation came crashing down on me. If I was picked to be the Dragon King's bride, I'd never be able to go home. I'd never see my mother again. I'd already been gone for so long. It was as though every move I'd made had led me farther and farther away from her, and now I was trapped in a place I'd never get home from. Great wracking sobs escaped my lips as Hatter pulled me into him.

I let the tears fall. I had no fight left. It was inevitable that the king was going to pick me. He'd invited me to his mountain home; he'd given me jewelry. He'd done none of that to the others. I cried until I'd wrung myself dry with emotion. At some point, Hatter had taken me to his bed. I lay next to him, my head in the crook of his arm and my hand on his bare chest.

I traced my hand in circles, feeling the sharp intake of breath from him as I ran my finger over his skin. Another time, another place, this would have turned into something more. But it wasn't another time or place. It was this weird time where dragons were people, and my future had been set in stone by a set of circumstances so weird that I still couldn't grasp them all. I hummed a small tune as I caressed him. I knew I was exciting him, and he was using all his self-control not to make a move. But he didn't. He lay still as I made patterns on his chest and wished for another world.

Eventually, I let the world disappear as I fell into the darkness of sleep.

I was woken up by the sound of people outside the tent milling around. My hand had found Hatter's hair in the night. I pulled it out slowly so as not to snag it, but it still woke him.

"Good morning," he whispered, his dark eyes sparkling. God, I wanted him so badly. My body was already pushed against his with only the thin material of the black t-shirt between us. I leaned up to kiss him, but at the last second, he moved slightly so that my lips caressed his cheek rather than his lips.

“We should get moving,” he said, glancing at his watch. “The king will be here soon, and all the prospective brides need to be ready.”

Frustration bubbled within me. We’d spent the night together, our bodies right up against each other. This was probably the last time we were going to see each other, and he was acting like it was nothing. I pulled myself out of bed and walked slowly to the entrance of the tent.

I made a big show of pulling my hair from the hair tie and putting it back in neatly, all the while bubbling with frustration and anger and not knowing what to do about any of it.

I turned on my heel back to him. He looked up at me from the bed with those gorgeous eyes of his and his body only half covered with the blanket.

“This was our only night together,” I raged, knowing that the people outside could hear every word. Tent’s weren’t exactly known for their soundproof qualities, and I was hardly being quiet. “One night. I thought you wanted me.” I felt my voice rising and my body beginning to shake as I let the anger take over. “And I’m going to have to go live up a mountain with a stranger and never see my mom again, and you won’t even kiss me!”

He stood up from the bed, and I swear I thought he was going to hit me. His eyes shone with such dark intensity and purpose as he quickly covered the ground between us. He grabbed my arms roughly, making me catch my breath, and after moving forward, he brought his lips to mine. I wasn’t ready. After all the shouting I’d done, all the emotion I’d let out, and I wasn’t ready for the intense way he made me feel as he crushed his lips to mine, almost angrily. It seemed I wasn’t the only one with strong emotions around here. I kissed back, matching his every move, the beautifully strange sensual excitement pulling us to each other. Oh, why couldn’t this have happened last night when I could have had time to enjoy it. Not that I wasn’t enjoying it. This was as far from a peck on the cheek as the edges of the Grand Canyon are to each other. It was raw, intense, and unlike anything I’d ever experienced. And God, I never wanted it to end.

His eyes were blazing with intensity when he finally pulled away.

“I didn’t kiss you because I hate this. I hate that I can’t save you. I hate that I have to think about you kissing another man, laying with him in his bed. I hate that you are hurting and that I can’t give you what you want. When you fell asleep on me last night, I watched you for hours. I went over and over in my mind, ways to save you from this, but I couldn’t think of anything. I don’t know this world, but I’ve seen enough to know that the dragons aren’t to be messed with. I didn’t kiss you because for everything that I am, I’m not good enough, and I never will be.”

I wanted to tell him that he was enough. He was all that I wanted, but it was too late. The signal marking the beginning of the choosing had just gone off. I turned and left the tent, my heart torn in two

Excitement filled the whole field, and the buzz increased the closer I walked to the stage. It was busier than I'd seen it before, which made sense considering this was the final day—the day that the King picked his bride.

Most of the contestants were already taking their places on the stage as I came to the barrier between the stage and the crowd. I had to push my way through to get to the entryway. One of the king's dragon guards was there, ushering everyone in. I noticed Lucy on the outside, letting everyone push past her. I hurried to her and linked her arm in mine. She was just as good as the other women on stage, even if she didn't think so herself. She looked the part in the dress she was given by the king. I was the only one who looked out of place in my black jeans and t-shirt combo. I stuck out like a sore thumb next to the women in their best dresses and their perfectly coiffed hair.

The queen sneered at us as we climbed the stairs to the stage. Her clothes were even more over the top than usual. Her red velvet dress and corset hitched her boobs up to unbelievable proportions. She had so much jewelry on that I was surprised she could move at all, and her makeup was layered on so thick, I wondered if it might crack. The king would never

pick her. I wished I could tell her, but Dormus was already taking to the stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he called out, and the crowd immediately went silent. “Today is the day. By the end of the day, one of these lovely ladies will be going to her new home with the Dragon King and, in the not too distant future, will become the queen. Give them all a round of applause.”

I felt ridiculously foolish as thousands of people I didn’t know clapped for me for something I didn’t want. I searched the crowd for Hatter, but he was nowhere to be seen.

I had never felt more out of place as Dormus introduced each of us to the crowd, and it wasn’t much of a surprise when I got the most boos. Of course, I did. I looked weird to these people. I was the only one not in a dress, and I hadn’t even bothered to run a comb through my hair. Plus, no one knew who I was. Unlike most of the other women, I didn’t have a huge family here to cheer me on.

Lucy grabbed my hand as the king was introduced and brought to the stage. Unlike me, he didn’t have to worry about getting booed off stage. The people loved him. I wasn’t sure who was the most excited to see him, the women on the stage or the people in the audience. Either way, it was safe to say that he was a popular guy.

He gave me a quick conspirational smile as he passed me. I plastered on a smile back even though I didn’t want any kind of conspiring with him. I didn’t want anything with him. The necklace he’d given me weighed heavily under my t-shirt, reminding me that I was the only one he’d given a gift to.

“Thank you so much, Mayor Dormus,” he began in his beautifully deep voice. “And thank you to all these ladies who have been brave enough to come on stage and join me in this competition.”

I almost snorted. Brave? It’s easy to be brave when endless riches and a hot man is at stake.

Mr. Dormus took over again. “His majesty will walk down the line of ladies. In turn, all but one will be asked to leave the stage. The last one on stage will be the lucky lady going home with his majesty.”

“Ow!” I hissed as Lucy gripped my hand more tightly.

“Sorry,” she mouthed back. “Too excited.”

I pulled my hand from hers and gave her a wry smile. She had nothing to be excited about. She already knew the king was going to pick me. Her excitement was all for me. I’d not known her long, but she was shaping up to be the best friend I’d ever had.

The king started at my end, making Lucy the first to speak with him.

She bubbled with enthusiasm as he approached her.

“Lucy, how wonderful to see you so soon.”

“The honor is mine, Your Majesty,” she said, dropping into a curtsy. “Even if you send me down from this stage, I’ll never forget when you took me in your arms and danced with me. It’s a memory I’ll cherish my entire life.”

Laying it on thick much? I grinned at her, though she didn’t notice. Her eyes were only on the king.

“I hope you’ll do me the honor of staying on the stage, dear Lucy.”

I don’t know who was more surprised, me or her. No one else was close enough to hear the whispered conversation between them.

She was staying on stage? Did that mean she’d won? I didn’t know, and it didn’t seem polite to ask.

It was difficult to concentrate when the king moved to me, what with Lucy’s giddy excitement next to me. I was more worried she was going to faint than anything the king said. He’d picked her. I was free!

“And Alice. Beautiful, wonderful Alice.”

“Er, hi.” Not quite as eloquent as Lucy, but the fact that she’d won was overwhelming me. I couldn’t keep the grin from my face.

“It has been an immense pleasure knowing you. I have not been able to stop thinking about you.”

He leaned forward and kissed my cheek, which knocked the grin from my face.

And then he was gone, moved on to the next person in line. He’d not asked me to leave the stage.

Maybe Lucy hadn’t won after all. I stood there in shock, not knowing what to do. There could only be one winner, and yet, the two of us were still on stage. I half expected one of his dragon men to haul me off the stage, but no one came to take me away. I was still in the running. I looked out into the crowd. Right in the middle by the front, Hatter stood. In a sea of booing people, he only looked sad.

I listened in to the quiet conversation with the girl on the other side of me. She was about my age with a beautiful braided updo and a pretty dress. The king thanked her for coming and asked her to leave the stage. That was it. No I’m honored to have you here, no how wonderful to see you, and definitely no kiss. She left the stage in tears as my jubilant thoughts of finally being able to get home came crashing down around me.

I tapped my toe lightly as my anxiety took over. Most women were sent off. Lucy and I had to watch them walk past us, most of them tearful.

I grabbed Lucy’s hand as he got to Mrs. Heart. His conversation with her lasted longer than his conversation with me. I would have killed to know what it was they were talking about, but they were much farther down the stage and still talking in hushed tones.

Mrs. Heart let out a girlish giggle as the king moved on. I waited for her to walk toward us as the others had, but to my horror, she remained where she was, a smug expression on her face.

One by one, the rest of the women were dismissed until there was only the three of us left.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We have three contestants left,” Dormus said. “Please come to the front of the stage, ladies.”

I gripped Lucy’s hand as the pair of us took our place next to Mrs. Heart. She gave us a self-satisfied smirk as though she’d already won. I didn’t know which feeling was stronger—my desire to lose, or to see her lose. The only palatable ending was for Lucy to win.

But he kissed you

The words ran through my mind as Dormus waffled on and the crowd cheered and booed.

The king whispered something in Dormus’s ear before the mayor spoke to the crowd.

“And now, we come to the part of the competition that you’ve all been waiting for. The king has told me his choice between these beautiful ladies. The winner is...”

He drew out the pause for a frustratingly long time. My stomach clenched as I took the stricken look on Hatter’s face mirroring my own expression. I turned to Lucy. She gave me a sickly smile and squeezed my hand.

The whole world seemed to stop. I held my breath as Dormus opened his mouth. Whatever he said would impact us all. I closed my eyes as he shouted out the name. It was only when the crowd erupted into cheers, and I felt Mrs. Heart slump beside me that the name registered.

“Lucy Lory.”

Lucy had won! I was free!

I didn't wait to be dismissed from the stage. No one cared about me anymore. I wasn't the bride. Lucy was. I jumped down and ran to the barrier where Hatter was waiting. His face was full of happiness as I fell into his arms and kissed him. The world fell away, and the roaring of the crowd was drowned out as our lips met. My heart took over the roaring, beating with the thrill of being free and the bigger thrill of feeling Hatter's lips on mine.

"Come on, he said, Let's get out of here."

I waved a quick goodbye to Lucy, but she didn't see. She was too absorbed in her new husband-to-be. Her face was flushed, and her smile wide. I just glimpsed Mrs. Heart being dragged off stage by the dragon guards as Hatter and I cut through the crowds to the Heart House.

Ten minutes later, we were there. Unfortunately, so was a guard. It was the same guard that had thrown me in the cellar the day before.

"Let us in!" I demanded, trying to sound a lot more confident than I felt.

"I'll do no such thing. Where is Mrs. Heart?"

Hatter stepped forward. "We don't have time for this. She's at the fair. She asked us to come and get something for her."

The guard wavered but didn't move from the door. "Get what?"

“Look,” Hatter said, grabbing a fistful of the guard’s shirt and pinning him to the door frame. “We’re coming in whether you like it or not.”

The guard grimaced, then brought his sword up to Hatter’s neck.

“It turns out, I don’t like it.”

I pulled on Hatter’s arm to drag him back before he got hurt. There were other ways to get into a house. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than breaking one of the windows.

“Put that sword down,” a voice behind me commanded. The guard dropped into a low bow as the Dragon King landed softly on the ground, Lucy in his arms.

He had wings! Actual wings. Ok, I knew he was a dragon, but this was the first time I’d seen him in anything other than his human form.

He certainly cut a formidable figure as he basically pushed past the guard.

Hatter and I followed as he walked through the entrance hall to the main room.

The last time I’d been in this room was literally another lifetime ago, and quite possibly, another dimension. I’d had a conversation about a cat painting with my mom. It was there, hanging on the wall, and now that I was here, I recognized the cat. It was the one that looked like Kit in the fairgrounds. In this weird reality, Kit belonged to Mrs. Heart. Urgh. I hoped that wherever the real Kit was, he never had to know that.

“I’m assuming you two are here because you want to go through the mirror?” The king asked.

I opened my mouth in surprise. “How do you know about the mirror?”

He didn’t have time to answer because right then, ten or so guards rushed into the room, swords aloft.

“King or not, you can’t be here without Mrs. Heart’s permission,” one of them yelled.

“Lucy, my darling,” the king said quietly.

She gazed up at him adoringly. “Yes, my love.”

I was seriously close to puking at the pair of them, but I was saving my stress levels for the guards who looked like they were about to skewer us.

“Take Alice and Mr. Hatter over there, will you?”

She let go of his hand and took mine instead. I grabbed Hatter’s as we ran to the opposite side of the room, away from the guards and the king.

“What’s he going to do?” I whispered. He was outnumbered ten to one and had no weapon.

The guards charged at him. He unfurled his wings, blocking my view from what happened next, but it wasn’t a stretch of the imagination to guess. Fire erupted from somewhere in front of the king. I assumed from his mouth, but I couldn’t see exactly. In any case, the problem of the guards was solved.

I counted them out of the window as they all ran for their lives. Ten. The king had managed to scare them all off without hurting a single one. The mantelpiece hadn’t fared so well. It glowed with embers.

“Isn’t he magnificent?” Lucy exclaimed.

“I wouldn’t wanna kiss him after that, though,” I murmured back.

“I didn’t even know dragons could spew fire in their human form,” Hatter added.

I grinned. “You didn’t even know that dragons could have human forms until a couple of days ago.”

“True.”

The Dragon King turned to face us. “I think it’s time we got you two home. Come on.”

We followed him up the stairs to the room with the mirror in it. Lucy gasped when she saw it.

“I didn’t believe you when you said you came through a mirror.”

I brought her into a hug. “I don’t quite believe it myself, but there you go.”

“The mirror is flawed,” Hatter remarked. “If we go through, we could end up anywhere.”

“And the mirror is broken in my timeline.”

“So go back to just before it was broken.”

“How?” Hatter and I chorused.

The Dragon King smiled. “Visualise the time you want to be. Think about what everything was like before you came through the mirror for the first time...or maybe five minutes before. I think that should work.”

“How do you know all this?” I couldn’t imagine him coming down to Mrs. Heart’s house and coming and going through the mirror.

He took my hand and pulled me to one side. “I meant what I said earlier, Alice. It has been the biggest honor to have met you. Do you still have the pendant I gave you?”

I nodded, fishing it out from the front of my t-shirt to show him.

“Good.” He kissed my cheek again and gave me a knowing smile.

“Take care of Lucy,” I warned him.

“I will endeavor to make her the happiest queen that has ever lived.”

It was only as Hatter and I linked fingers to walk through the mirror that I realized the king hadn’t answered my question.

I closed my eyes, and with Hatter at my side, we stepped through the mirror.

The room looked exactly as I left it back in 2021.

“Is this the right time?” Hatter asked.

I ran to the window. The moving van was parked outside right where my mother had left it.

A rush of happiness bubbled up inside me. “It is!”

Outside the door, I heard footsteps. Hatter grabbed my arm and dragged me into the wardrobe as the room door opened.

I sucked in a breath as I saw another version of myself through a small gap in the wardrobe. This was me from before I smashed the mirror.

I wanted to cry out, to tell her to run, but in doing so, I would never meet Hatter. I had to let myself go through the mirror to get to where I was now.

Upstairs I could hear my mother dragging furniture around. There was a loud bang from above, followed by my mother cursing. I’d forgotten about that. I held my breath as the mirror came off from the wall and toppled over, eating the old me up. I vanished through the glass of the mirror, but it didn’t hit the ground like I thought it had. It knocked a vase from a small side table, sending it crashing to the ground. The mirror was so large that the top of it hit the wall on the opposite side of the room. It was the vase I’d heard

smash all that time ago, not the mirror! It meant that Hatter could have come from my timeline, after all.

“Alice?” My mom’s voice drifted down the stairs. I stepped out of the wardrobe to the sound of her running down the stairs.

“What happened?” She asked as she ran into the room. “Who’s this?”

Crap. I’d forgotten to come up with a story about Hatter being here.

“Hello, Ms. Tenniel. I’m Lewis, Lewis Carroll.”

I stared up at him. In all the time I’d known him, I’d always called him Hatter. I’d assumed it was his surname as well as his occupation.

“I’m here to help you move and pack Mrs. Heart’s things. Her estate hired me.”

My mother narrowed her eyes. “No one told me about this. It’s not going to affect how much I get paid, is it?”

Ha, so much like my mother to worry about money. I had missed her so much, it was all I could do not to hug her.

“I assure you that my being here will not affect your payment. I’m merely here to help.”

She appraised him for a minute, then her face brightened up. “Well then, let’s start with getting this mirror back on the wall. What happened anyway?”

“I think it fell off the wall when you dropped something upstairs,” I said, pushing against the frame.

“Oops,” my mother said. “Good thing it didn’t hit you. It could have caused some real damage. What’s that around your neck?” She took hold of the pendant and gazed down at it. There was something strange about the way she looked at it

“I found it in a drawer,” I improvised.

“Huh,” she shook her head. “It’s just like one your father used to wear.”

I inhaled a breath as everything fell into place. My father was the Dragon King. That’s why he was the way he was with me. That’s why he

knew how to use the mirror. One day soon, I'd tell my mother the truth.

"I think it's time for that cake," my mother said, wiping sweat from her brow. She turned to Hatter. "Did Alice tell you it's her eighteenth birthday?"

Hatter shook his head. "I don't believe she did, but I certainly agree with getting cake."

My mother left the room first. Hatter threaded his fingers through mine.

"I didn't know it was your birthday," he whispered.

"I didn't know you were called Lewis," I whispered back.

"Touché."

"You know, we should write a story about everything that's happened to us. We can call it *Travels with Dragons*."

"How about *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*?"

And with that, we walked downstairs, and I was finally able to get my cake.

ABOUT J.A. ARMITAGE

J.A lives in a total fantasy world (because reality is boring right?) When she's not writing all the crazy fun in her head, she can be found eating cake, designing pretty pictures and hanging upside down from the tallest climbing frame in the local playground while her children look on in embarrassment. She's travelled the world working as everything from a banana picker in Australia to a Pantomime clown, has climbed to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and the bottom of the Grand Canyon and once gave birth to a surrogate baby for a friend of hers.

Somehow she finds time to write.

ABOUT J.A. CULICAN

J.A. Culican is a USA Today Bestselling author of the middle grade fantasy series Keeper of Dragons. Her first novel in the fictional series catapulted a trajectory of titles and awards, including top selling author on the USA Today bestsellers list and Amazon, and a rightfully earned spot as an international best seller. Additional accolades include Best Fantasy Book of 2016, Runner-up in Reality Bites Book Awards, and 1st place for Best Coming of Age Book from the Indie book Awards.

J.A. Culican holds a Master's degree in Special Education from Niagara University, in which she has been teaching special education for over 13 years. She is also the president of the autism awareness non-profit Puzzle Peace United. J.A. Culican resides in Southern New Jersey with her husband and four young children.